

The love story I'm about to tell you relates very little to every other love story that's ever been told. It starts with a hate as cold as ice... but you'll just have to see how it ends.

I'm young and he is too, and he's the one obstacle on the course to winning--the thing I love the most. But somehow, he's proven that competition, being competitive, isn't worth everything.

My first memory of winning was in first grade during a game of soccer in gym class.

"There's no 'i' in team, Leap," the hyper, perky gym teacher tells me. She shakes her head of just died blonde hair. "Try to be a good sportsman."

"I don't want to, Miss Hill. I want to WIN. And guess what? There's an 'i' in win," I tell the overly chipper woman, who frowns and walks away.

Now, I have so many memories of winning, I could write a book. And with a name like mine, everyone would buy it.

My name. That's another story all together. I was born on February 29. It doesn't occur every year: it's leap day. Hence the name Leap.

But honestly? It's just another thing that sets me apart from the crowd. Besides my flaming red hair, over freckled face, loud voice, bright confidence, and amazing smarts, I've got a crazy birthday and a crazy name to match. I may sound self centered, but that's all the truth. And the truth is never, ever bragging. It's simply stating the facts.

Nobody else thinks the same way I do. Nobody challenges me, not even teachers. My broad range of knowledge and expansive vocabulary just scares everyone, honestly. It's part of the reason I'm not a loser, loner or nerd. I'm just abnormally smart. Not strange.

That was all true, just like my self description, until that fateful day when I met Benjamin Barton.

Ben was in my math class, which was an advanced placement math class for eleventh graders when we were in the ninth grade. He was my age, the other kid prodigy of Elmhurst Prep.

He was taller than me, more outgoing, maybe even louder. He

had curly, Caesar-style butter blonde hair and glowing blue eyes. He, like me, was not afraid of the bigger kids. We both spoke up when we had something to add. We both loved to argue. And we both loved to win.

“Excuse me, Mr. B, but shouldn’t x equal y squared instead of y cubed?” I spoke up one day. Our frazzled, toupee-wearing teacher frantically changed the answer.

“No, actually, *Leap*, the answer is unknown, because there are too many variables,” replied a snarky voice one day after I made one of my usual remarks. I turned to meet the narrowed, light blue eyes of Benjamin Barton. As much as I hated to admit it... well, they were nice eyes. *Very nice eyes.*

I raised a gingery eyebrow at him. He was questioning my answer? Ben could say whatever nerdy thing he wanted, honestly, but I couldn’t let it go that he was, well, testing me. He often made points in class that were interesting, sure, but he never had actually disputed one of my statements.

“Are you sure? The equation has only four variables, *Benjamin*,” I told him proudly. I wasn’t afraid to respond, because I had that kind of confidence that was constant.

“No, actually, it has five,” my competitor answered. He walked to the board, taking a piece of chalk from our stunned teacher’s hand. Our teacher. Oh yeah. I’d almost forgotten it wasn’t just him and I. Ben took the chalk and first circled the FOUR variables. When I started to protest, he began to scribble some unintelligible things next to a chart with gold stars and my name.

I felt a gasp rising in my throat. This boy, one who I barely knew, thought an argument over math was worth cussing me out for? Well, I loved competition. In fact, I loved it almost as much as winning.

I strutted up to the board and grabbed the chalk.

My loopy, narrow script was visibly different from his small, squeezed in print.

Next to his name, I wrote only two words.

Game on.

“Excuse me, Mr. Bertrand, but I think you meant to put a “9”

instead of a “4,” Ben told our teacher annoyingly in that voice of his. It was the day after our first argument, and he was fueling the fire. He waited for our teacher to change it before turning to the wall mounted mirror to fluff his blonde ringlets.

Vain, I thought. This was the most idiotic guy ever. He thought he was good looking, too. Hilarious.

Actually, now that I thought about it, his nice outsides were complementary to his braininess. He was attractive, maybe more. If I didn't know him, I might even call him... dare I say... cute.

I felt ashamed for even thinking that. I felt like the whole class of advanced eleventh graders could hear my innermost thoughts, and the embarrassment was almost too much. Even worse, I'd not even *once* voiced my opinion about his answer, which I mentally checked. My hands grappled for a pencil, which I grasped lightly and quickly and adeptly. His work was wrong; the answer was supposed to be 9.7.

“The answer is 9.7,” I announced loudly.

“What makes you think you're so smart, Leap?” Ben's voice echoed across the classroom. It was a random question, but I had little to think about. Truly smart people have a scratch for every itch--an answer for every question. I personally have even more; I'm prepared with a question for every answer.

“Nothing makes me *think* I'm smart. I know I'm smart. And you?” I replied.

“Same. I know you're smart, actually, but I also know I'm smarter. I can list the periodic table of elements--forward and backward,” Ben challenged.

“I can speak four languages,” I responded quickly. I could feel that pesky feeling of insecurity creeping up, and I banished it. Never let the enemy sense your fear.

“I can list the dates of every French war. In order,” Ben answered.

“I can name every country in Europe. Alphabetically,” I added.

“I can do binomial equations,” Ben declared.

“I can do polynomial equations,” I topped it.

“I can...” he hesitated, “name every law from the prohibition period.” But he'd paused, and he could sense his own defeat. I raised my eyebrow, a gesture which was quickly becoming my trademark,

and plopped down in my chair. He ran a hand through his recently fluffed hair insecurely. I was a point up, and we both knew it.

That day after school, he cornered me.

It was my fault, because I'd decided that I wanted to walk by his locker and catch a glimpse of the competition.

I had just left my blue painted locker with my green backpack slung haphazardly over my my small shoulder. Ben towered over me, a good three inch advantage on my petite frame.

"What do you want?" I asked, hoping to find a way out of the evil genius' clutches.

"To ask you something," Ben said. He shrugged and stepped toward the locker row awkwardly. There was a pregnant pause before I spoke.

"What could you possibly have an unquenchable desire for me to tell you?" I wondered aloud.

"I just want to know if you think... er... this is embarrassing," he bit his lip, "but, Leap, I need help."

"What could the almighty Benjamin Barton want from me?" I sarcastically added.

"C'mon, you're not still caught up in math, are you? We both know I'm smarter," the competitive evil twin showed himself.

"Oh, Ben. You may be smart, but I'm smartest," I countered.

"Sure about that, Leap?" He cockily grinned.

"Positive," I answered, confidence seeping out from every word I spoke. I could feel the tension in the air, and from the way Ben's eyes were roaming, he could too.

"Okay. Well, I know I'm the smartest, so I won't get into that. Besides, I've got to ask you for help, remember? So here it is: Leap, I need help with my science fair project," he finished with a flourish. I raised one eyebrow proudly. He needed my help!

"Well," I began, trying to sound cool, "I suppose I could help you. What are you doing?"

"It's a chemistry experiment. I'm trying to figure out how magnetism affects different organisms, and I could really use some help. See, I just can't get the exact reaction I want. A helper--almost a co-pilot--would be great," Ben explained.

"Uh-uh. I'm not anyone's 'helper' or 'co-pilot'. I have to be the

boss. The Big Kahuna, if you will; the absolute leader. No second best for me,” I told him as warning bells rang out in my head. Second in command? No way.

“Alright. You have control issues. So do I. We can compromise. Shared power. Not second in command, per say, just co-captains,” Ben responded quickly. I could see it in his eyes: he was serious about this project. I found myself becoming dangerously interested, which was frightening, and I quickly tried to eliminate that fear of attachment. It had happened before and turned out badly.

Four and a half years ago, my parents decided they wanted another child. I was thrilled at the prospect. The new addition to the Lawton household was exciting; and when it was time, he came. He was a boy, a handsome baby named Leonid, after the meteor shower (my dad’s a professor of astronomy) Leo for short.

But Leo wasn’t quite “right”.

He had Cerebral Palsy, among a variety of other birth defects. The burden wore on my parents, causing a stress on their parenthood for me and Leo both. And then, when Leo was eight months old, he died.

I’d been so attached to the ethereal little being that was my newborn brother, and then he’d died. And there was no way I was going to get that invested in anything ever again. Not a project. Not a boy. Even a boy who was as smart as he was attractive and had gleaming blue eyes...

STOP! I mentally told myself, looking up at Ben. He was staring expectantly at me.

“Yes. Yeah, I’ll help. Shared power sounds fine. When do I start?” I quickly responded.

“Today? Right now?” Ben asked hopefully. I didn’t reply. Instead, I gestured for him to lead the way, which he did. In a few minutes, we’d reached the chemistry lab 1C. It was not in use and thus very private.

“This is the rough plan,” Ben declared, holding out a piece of notebook paper with his scribbled handwriting covering every millimeter, including the margins. I looked at him with my brow furrowed, and he shrugged.

“So I’m not the neatest. But it’s a great plan. Just read it over,” he defended his work.

I did just that. The writing was cryptic but became clearer, and when I was done, I felt a fury bubble up inside of me. This was good. Really good. And he had thought of it. Not me.

“Leap,” he said, “I’m going to get the frogs from the closet and we can run some tests on them, okay?”

“Fine,” I answered. I began to set up the lab, including the lab’s tripod and camera. I wanted video of our hard work. I also set up the double burner, a few animal muscle relaxants, and a habitat for testing. When Ben came back, I was sitting on an unused lab table and simpering.

We began some tests quietly, our ideas meshing well. This was better than I’d thought. The dimly lit lab’s lighting faded as the sun went down from the windows behind us. The tests were going well and the animals were behaving. It was perfect.

I checked the sterling silver Swiss Army watch around my wrist just as we were finishing with the baby mice. It was later than I’d expected; the time had flown by. I felt accomplished and happy.

“I’ve got to go, Ben,” I warned my lab partner.

“Kay. Thanks for your help, Leap,” he smiled.

“Ben...” I began.

“What?” He asked.

“Um, I’m sorry I kept saying I was smarter. Even though I am, it wasn’t nice to rub it in your face,” I told him. It was apologetic but hardly a white flag. I never quit, just like I never lose.

“I’m sorry too. I’m the smartest, but you know. It’s mean to brag,” Ben grinned.

“Well, I don’t think you’re smarter than me..but...” I allowed.

“Okay. Well, thanks again for the help, Leap.”

“You’re welcome, Ben.” My voice got softer. How blue were his eyes? Bluer than anything I’d ever seen before. And then there were his lips. Like a perfect Cupid’s Bow almost, so pink and well curved. I couldn’t stop imagining how they would feel on mine.

“Actually, Leap, you’re pretty smart,” he complimented, his voice almost a whisper.

There was so much to like about him. Even the way he argued with me, challenging me every other word. When we argued, it was actually fun. So perfect and so right. We were like a half of the same whole--competitive and smart, but still full of feeling.

And those lips, the ones I'd just been focused on, were coming toward mine. We finally met in a kiss. It was my first and it was perfect.

Ben was a *very* good kisser. It was soft and smooth and still hard and passionate, just like us. The kiss was full of life but still romantic. I had found someone just like me. So smart and so put together, but still so in love.

When we finally pulled apart, he looked at me closer, eyeing my red curls and green cat's eyes.

"You know what, Leap?" Ben asked, lightly caressing my hair.

"What?"

"All my life, I thought winning was about smarts and only smarts. But now that I've met you, one of the smartest people ever, I think I know that winning isn't just about smarts. It's about being happy, too."

"I'm still the smartest," I added quietly. I couldn't go down without a fight.

We both began to laugh, that kiss and our bond growing stronger by the second.

For once in my life, I was winning alongside another winner.

This was still competition.

This was really winning.