

Love and Lost (September 30, 2003)

by Paul Marks

I was seventeen and Isabelle was the air I breathed. In and out. In and out. She would walk by in the hall and leave me astounded, as though a gentle spring breeze had passed, giving me the sensation of warmth yet to come. She was a fairy-tale princess, followed by the fragrance of flowers and the singing of sparrows.

My friends laughed at my infatuation. She was above us, above our station in life. She was a goddess on a pedestal, not one who would deign to walk among mortals . . . and I worshipped her. Brian was the most merciless. He and I both had the same feelings, but he was better at hiding them. While I would mope and wander in a cloud of despair, he would joke and brag and carry on. Isabelle had no effect on him for all that anyone else knew, except me; I knew better.

Isabelle was at the height of her popularity. Homecoming had crowned her as princess, and everyone knew that she would be queen next year. She had friends who surrounded her, both male and female, who laughed at her jokes and invited her to parties. She wasn't a flake like so many of the popular girls. She had a cutting intelligence, but a merciful tongue. More than anything, this was what had earned my devotion. It didn't hurt that she was hot.

We were slugs by comparison. While I kept my clothes neat, they were certainly not the newest fashions. We said that we didn't care about style or that we had a style all our own, but the truth was that our families couldn't afford for us to look as good as the better dressed students. Except Brian. He dressed like that as a statement. His parents weren't rich, but they

weren't bad off either. Yet he was embarrassed by them. He seemed to wish he came from a broken home. Regardless, we were not in Isabelle's league. She didn't even know we existed, or so we thought.

I sat in Mr. Gardner's class in the desk behind Emily Baker and in front of Bill Stoneford. Isabelle, by the grace of random chance and fate, sat in the seat to my left. Brian was in biology this period with most of our other friends while I was stuck in trigonometry. I had a head for math that my friends lacked, but I still dreaded the class. Mr. Gardener loved the idea of group work, which usually meant that I would do the homework while my "partner" copied my answers. I almost took Brian's advice and stopped doing homework altogether, but math was my only way out, and I wasn't going to blow it.

Stupid partners. The worst part was when he let people choose their partners. I always was paired up with Jeremy Pinstrum, an annoying kid who still laughed at his own farts. Even though people knew I was good at math; no one would choose me as a partner . . . until that Thursday.

"Partner up," Mr. Gardner called from behind his desk. "Check your work and be ready to answer questions."

I lowered into my chair and pretended that I didn't exist.

"Could you help me?" came the voice of an angel above me.

I looked over and was lost in the ocean of Isabelle's eyes. I sat up immediately.

"Sure."

Isabelle slowly brought around her desk. I glanced around the room, certain that everyone was watching me. The only person who looked in my direction was Tony Fisher. He just got the short straw of being partnered with Jeremy. And Jeremy was laughing.

I gave Tony a weak smile and pulled my desk to face Isabelle. She was rummaging through her papers. Then she looked up. And my heart stopped.

I wish I could say I said something clever that won her over, but nothing clever came to mind. Actually, nothing came to mind. I wasn't even much help going over the problems. I just sat there in a sort of dazed confusion. It was the most wonderful five minutes I've ever spent going over math.

"You have 2nd lunch, don't you?"

The question came out of the blue.

"Uh, yeah." I believe that was longest sentence I had spoken up until that point.

She looked like she was about to say something, but Mr. Gardner took that moment to have us move our seats back to their spots.

"I'll tell you later," she whispered quickly as we shifted our seats.

I have no idea what happened for the rest of that class. I kept sneaking peeks in Isabelle's direction, and I caught her looking at me once, but nothing else happened.

Lunch time rolled around, and my heart thumped in my chest. I stood outside the cafeteria doors, trying to look casual while stretching my neck to see over the people in front of me. It didn't work.

"What's up with you?" asked Brian's voice from my shoulder. He cut into the line in front on me, cutting off a freshman's complaint with a look.

“Isabelle talked with me during trig. She said something about lunch,” I whispered in excited tones, and then immediately regretted it. Brian’s face clouded, and I knew what he was thinking.

“That’s great,” he mumbled before turning around, facing the front of the line. I remembered then about our whispered conversations. While my passion for Isabelle was hot, it was like ice when compared to Brian’s.

By the time we had paid for our food, Brian was in a better mood. But his smile fell when Isabelle headed in our direction. She had her lunch from home in her hand.

“Mark (that was me), come sit over here.” She motioned to an empty table nearby.

I looked at Brian.

“Go on,” he growled. “Have fun.”

Who was I to argue? I walked over and set my tray down across the table from hers. From where I was sitting, I could see Brian go over to the gang and sit next to my regular spot. He said something and nearly all of the gang’s heads whipped around at once to look my way. Thankfully, Isabelle couldn’t see them. I pretended that I couldn’t.

We spent the lunch talking, really talking. I don’t know why she chose that day to talk to me or why she would want to talk to me at all, but it was wonderful. Wonderful except for those moments when I caught Brian’s eye and I saw the depression and jealousy in them. It was one of those moments that Isabelle caught me off guard.

“I knew you were a lot of fun, even if you usually look like you want to kill someone.”

I blinked and wondered what she was talking about. I could smile, when I wanted to.

“Would you like to go to the game this Friday?”

“Would I . . .” I choked on the words.

“. . . like to go on a date?” she finished for me.

“I . . .” I looked at Brian. Something he said before, about sticking with our own people, came to mind. Something about knowing who your friends are and knowing who you could count on. Well . . . forget that. “I would love to.”

I don't think that Brian and I have spoken three words since.