

WHAT IF ONE TOUCH
COULD TELL YOU EVERYTHING?

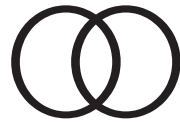
ZEN
DIAGRAM



WENDY BRANT

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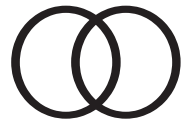
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*For Jimmy, Emma and Nathan.
Love you forever and eva.*



CHAPTER 1

I HOLD JOSH'S TI-84 IN MY LEFT HAND, press a few buttons just for show and wait for the vision to come.

The TI-84 is my favorite lower-end calculator. Not many teenagers have a favorite calculator, much less favorite calculators in different price ranges, but I'm super cool like that. My dream calculator is the TI-Nspire CX CAS Handheld graphing calculator with full-color display. I yearn for it the way some girls my age might obsess over a cute pair of boots.

Yeah. I'm into calculators like most teenage girls are into footwear.

Have I *mentioned* that I'm super cool?

But the appeal of the TI-84 is completely lost on Josh. From the looks of my newest tutee, I'd guess he uses it mostly to spell out upside-down words like *hell* (7734) or *boobies* (5318008). I doubt he appreciates the fact that it can do complex calculations faster than he can send a text.

I glance over at his square jaw, his thick forearms, and then down at the calculator again. What a waste of a finely engineered piece of equipment — both Josh *and* the TI-84.

I type in numbers — 53177187714 — just to entertain myself while I wait. Some visions take longer than others and I often need to buy time while they gel, but Josh is too busy checking his phone to notice I'm stalling. Everyone is always too busy with their phones to notice anything.

We could have used the calculator app on his beloved phone instead, but if he'd asked (he didn't), I would have insisted that we use the TI-84. The visions I get — I call them algos (short for algorithms: nerd alert!) — from his calculator tell me all about Josh's math issues: where he's struggling, what he gets and doesn't get. They lay out a nice little road map for me to follow on our path to eventual trigonometry success. I wish I could take credit for being a tutoring genius, but the algos are the only reason I'm such a rock star (mathematically speaking). I don't control the visions any more than I control the weather: it rains, I get wet. I touch the calculators, I get the algos.

Josh looks up from his phone long enough to notice the number word I've typed and he grins, probably surprised that nerdy math girl has a sense of humor. Sometimes it sort of surprises me, too.

"Hillbillies." He laughs. "Classic."

I nod and think about making a joke, but the familiar light-headed tickle has started, the vague dizziness and dull headache that signal the algo is close. I tense up a little, hoping it is just an algo vision and not the other kind. Usually the other kind won't ease in so politely, but you never know.

Once in a while a vision will start like an algo and then go all Jekyll and Hyde on me.

But this one stays mellow. I let myself relax into the familiar and almost soothing patterns, the unexplainable language of symbols and colors, and when I look up a moment later, Josh hasn't even noticed the pause in conversation because he's back to gazing at his phone. I set the calculator on the table, clear my throat quietly and reach for my pencil. The calculator algo gave me more information in just a few seconds than sitting with him for hours would have. I mean, I'm good at math and everything — awesome at math, actually — but without my little visions the process would be tedious. While I'm good at figuring out numbers, I'm not so good at figuring out people.

Coaches love me because I can get a flunking athlete eligible faster than you can say *football scholarship*. I can't really take credit for it — I don't cause the visions any more than I cause my own fingernails to grow. But I get the credit.

And of course the shit that sometimes goes with them.

"So, you drew the short straw, huh?" Josh says, putting down his phone and spinning his pencil across his knuckles with a flick of his thumb. I wonder how he learned to spin it like that, like a little yellow baton floating around his fingers. It's quite impressive actually. I suppose it's what he does in trig instead of paying attention.

"Hmmm?" I flip through his book, looking for the right section. His algo told me he's just not grasping the idea of basic trigonometric functions: sine, cosine, tangent. Easy peasy. I feel a happy anticipation that I'll get to unravel it for him. In the beginning I'm always optimistic that I can make

everyone love math, like when you try to convince someone to watch your favorite TV show. Eventually I realize that my tutees are not usually the right audience for math appreciation, but in the beginning I am the master of hope.

“I suck at math,” he says apologetically. “Like, big ol’ legit bucket of suck.”

I shrug and try to offer some consolation: “I suck at football.”

He silently flips his pencil again as I find the right page. When I glance up, he’s looking down at the tabletop, the tips of his ears a little red, a small patch of pink on each cheek. If I didn’t know better, I’d say he looks embarrassed. Maybe even ... ashamed. Is it possible for boys like him — football-playing boys with pecs and blue eyes and basketball shoes that cost more than my dream calculator — to feel embarrassed about not being good at math? I thought boys like him *reveled* in not being good at math.

Whatever the reason, he looks kind of embarrassed and any other girl might reach out, touch his arm to reassure him. But for me, touching his arm would unleash God-knows-what kind of shit storm, so I fold my hands carefully in my lap and try to reassure him in a different way.

“Lucky for you,” I say, my voice purposefully cocky and light, “I’m *awesome* at math. Wait till you see. You’re going to Freak. The freak. Out.”

This makes him smile a little. His pencil stills in his hand.

I clear my throat. “Cosine,” I say, and start to copy a problem onto the paper. “It’s not just something your dad does on loans.” He laughs a little, the pink in his cheeks fades and we get to work.

During our session the surprisingly polite Josh offers me a piece of gum, his pencil when I break mine in my overzealous scribbling and his notebook when I need another piece of paper, but I decline every time. My aversion to touching other people's things, and other people for that matter, has earned me the unfair reputation of being a germaphobe, but I'm not trying to protect myself from germs. Hell, I'd lick a toilet seat if you promised me a TI-Nspire CX CAS Handheld graphing calculator with full-color display. And it's not the algos I'm trying to avoid; those are actually almost pleasant to a math dweeb like me. No, it's the other visions — the fractals — I try to stay away from.

The algos I get from his calculator tell me about math and math only. I mean, who (besides me) has any kind of emotional attachment to calculators? Calculators are used for one purpose and they pretty much soak up only a person's math-related struggles. But the visions I would get from touching his phone, or pretty much anything else of his, or especially *him*, would tell me about *all* the rest of his issues. Seriously. *All* of them. Instead of any kind of helpful road map it'd be more of a chaotic flood of personal information, a monsoon of crap that has nothing to do with math. Stuff about his childhood, about his insecurities and fears, about his past traumas. And instead of enabling me to help *him*, those visions would just leave *me* feeling helpless.

Calculator visions are harmless drizzle compared to the tsunami I get from cell phones, with all their teenage emotional baggage. All the drama of Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat; all the texts, all the photos. When I hold someone else's cell phone, I'm immediately dripping in cold sweat, swept

away in a hurricane of things I really don't need to know.

I need to know about the math and the math only. I've learned a few things in the years I've been doing this, often the hard way. Don't touch. Don't take on everyone else's burdens. Don't try to fix things. Just keep your damn hands to yourself.

Before we're through with our session, I hold Josh's calculator again to check in. The algo comes more quickly this time, as if the calculator now recognizes me as some kind of BFF. It whispers, in the weird language only I understand, that we're heading in the right direction. We'll have to keep meeting for a while, but I estimate that Josh will eventually lift his grade up to a solid C, which will be good enough for both him and his coach. How a C is good enough for *anyone*, I'm not sure I'll ever understand. But somehow he will be satisfied by his own mediocrity, I'll be thanked for getting him football eligible and we'll both go on our merry way.

By the time Josh gets up to leave, his phone-checking detachment is nearly gone. I'm not exactly a warm-and-fuzzy girl, but Josh has grown comfortable enough to let down his cool-guy vibe a smidge.

"So. You and trig got a thing, huh," he says, more a statement than a question. I don't speak Teen as well as most of my peers, but I'm smart enough to figure out that he's complimenting me, and a compliment about math is always enough to make me blush a little.

"Trig. Calculus." I shrug. "I'm kind of an all-around math slut."

He laughs and nods. "That's cool."

I'm sure I don't need to explain how very *uncool* having a

thing with trig is, but I am flattered anyway. I snap his book closed and slide it toward him across the table.

He hesitates to take it and when I glance up to see why, I find him studying me more closely than he has in the entire half hour we've been together. I shift uncomfortably under his gaze, unfamiliar with this level of male scrutiny.

"You know, you're actually pretty cute in, like" — he pauses and tilts his head, trying to find the right description — "a hot-librarian sort of way."

This one catches me off guard.

"Oh." I look down and brush eraser crumbs off the table. "Okay. Thanks?" A much more traditional compliment about my looks is buried in this observation somewhere, but it's diluted by the surprise in his voice, the word *actually*, and the librarian comparison. But I sense he thinks I should be flattered to get this little nugget from a guy like him.

I mean, I have to admit he is one of the more attractive kids I've tutored, although his purposeful effort at it is a bit of a turnoff. He does these little head flips to keep his boy-band hair out of his eyes, which ends up coming across like some kind of tic. His Nike T-shirt, with the word *Determined* emblazoned across the chest, makes me think it should have an invisible subtitle: *to get in your pants*. The Axe sex potion he has liberally doused himself in floats around him like a haze, smelling pretty good at first, but then eating away at your mucous membranes until all you can think about is fresh, unscented air. He has put a lot of effort into looking and smelling the way he does, but all I can think is that if he put that much effort into math, he'd probably get a higher grade than a C.

I hear the opposite kind of feedback about my looks: that *I'd* be pretty if I tried a little *harder*. Wore my contacts more often, put on a little more makeup, showed some skin. But to me, being pretty isn't something worth *trying* at. It would be like trying at being tall. So I focus on accomplishments I can master: running a six-minute mile, solving the Riemann hypothesis, picking up dropped items with my feet. But putting an excessive amount of effort into being pretty? Not worth my time or my money. My beauty routine is limited to good hygiene, clothes that won't get me picked on and the occasional coat of mascara when I'm feeling nutty. I mean, I'm not *Amish*, after all.

I guess my indifference to my own appearance is unusual. Most women could make a full-time job of trying to be prettier, and sadly beauty is the one thing that we, as a gender, work at the hardest.

Josh has thanked me and left by the time my friend Charlotte peeks her head into the room, glancing around quickly before her eyes settle on me. God love her, she smiles and tries to act happy, but I know it's killing her that she's missed Mr. Determined.

"All done?" she asks with a forced lightness. "I'll give you a ride home." She has private cello lessons with her orchestra teacher after school on Fridays and always checks in with me before she heads home, today more eagerly than usual.

"I have one more. But thanks."

Charlotte nods and lingers for a moment. It takes everything in her not to ask.

"He was ... nice," I tell her, somewhat reluctant to admit it. "Nicer than I expected. You could fumigate an entire apart-

ment building with his cologne vapors and I think maybe he thought he was doing *me* the favor, but he was polite at least.”

She raises her eyebrows innocently. “Who?”

God, she is *such* a bad actress.

I roll my eyes and give her a look. Charlotte has recently rekindled a middle-school crush on Josh and she flipped out when she heard I was going to be tutoring him. But honestly, there is no Venn diagram between his social circle and ours. Josh’s friends are football players and cheerleaders, kids who go to parties that involve cases of beer, kids to whom homework is an afterthought, an optional side effect of education. Charlotte and I hang with the straight-A orchestra geeks and mathletes, whose parties involve intense games of Catan and cans of Monster instead of beer. Really, our circles only intersect in Josh’s far-reaching olfactory cloud, which isn’t saying much because kids in Minneapolis might actually be able to smell him. His scent is a phenomenon that crosses state boundaries.

Charlotte hesitates a moment longer, hoping for more, but I have another kid due any minute. When she realizes I won’t be indulging her any further, she shrugs nonchalantly.

“Cool,” she says. “Text me.”

She turns to go, bumping her shoulder roughly against the door frame and then tripping into the hall. Clumsy as hell, that one, but unlike most girls, Charlotte is pretty without even trying. She’s all long, lean legs and flat stomach, symmetrical features, toothpaste-commercial smile. Her thick blond hair is cut in a cute short pixie, the anti-haircut of every other teenage girl in a hundred-mile radius. You’d think her supermodel good looks would be enough to make

her popular, but when they vote for things like homecoming court, quiet, smart, statuesque Charlotte is overlooked in favor of loud cheerleaders with big boobs. So boys like Josh don't really pay much attention to her. One of my frequent and fervent wishes is that boys get smarter with age.

I have the sinking feeling I'm going to be terribly disappointed.

I'm overlooked by boys, too, but not because I'm taller than they are or unnervingly beautiful (which I'm not), or because I'm unusually unattractive (also not). Mostly it's because I'm a little weird and love math the way most girls love Starbucks. Plus, as I mentioned, I don't create a welcoming atmosphere with my seemingly germaphobic tendencies. I don't place my hand flirtatiously on muscular arms and giggle. I don't hug everyone for no reason or push at firm chests in mock aggression. I keep my hands to myself, and I know for a fact that that's *not* where teenage boys generally want a girl's hands.



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has a degree in journalism from Northwestern University and has completed the Publishing Institute at the University of Denver. She lives just outside Chicago, Illinois, with her husband, teenage daughter and son, and guinea pigs Mac and Tosh. Zenn Diagram is her first novel.

Visit Wendy at wendybrant.net, on Facebook (ZennDiagram) and on Twitter @wendyjobrant.

MATH GENIUS. FREAK OF NATURE. LONER.

Eva Walker has literally one friend and it's not even because she's a math nerd. No, Eva is a loner out of necessity, because everyone and everything around her is an emotional minefield. All she has to do is touch someone, or their shirt, or their cell phone, and she can read all their secrets, their insecurities, their fears.

Sure, Eva's "gift" comes in handy when she's tutoring math and she can learn where people are struggling just by touching their calculators. For the most part, though, it's safer to keep her hands to herself. Until she meets six-foot-three, cute-without-trying Zenn Bennett, who makes that nearly impossible.

Zenn's jacket gives Eva such a dark and violent vision that you'd think not touching him would be easy. But sometimes you have to take a risk ...

Praise for ZENN DIAGRAM

"Brant's debut is an absolute treat."

— *Booklist*, starred review

"Readers who love quirky, character-driven romances, such as John Green's *An Abundance of Katherines* and heartstring-yanking melodrama in the vein of Lauren Oliver's YA books will enjoy this novel."

— *School Library Journal*

"... this novel about complex emotional connections, painful family histories, hope, forgiveness, love, and romance is a promising start for Brant."

— *Publishers Weekly*

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