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The (Almost) Perfect Guide to Imperfect Boys

CHAPTER 1

Today Wyeth Brockman became a Croaker.

Well, I mean, almost. Really close.

The way it happened was, he asked my best friend, Maya, if she'd seen this movie called *Battlescar III*. And when Maya said no (because seriously, why would she), Wyeth replied, "Well, I'm going this weekend."

His voice croaked on the word "weekend." Like it went "WEEK" (high pitch) "end" (lower pitch). And then he turned the color of a moldy strawberry.

For Wyeth, this was progress.

Okay, I'll explain.

A few months ago, Maya and I had divided all the boys we knew into three categories: Tadpole, Croaker, and Frog. We'd even made a chart about it in my science binder: *The Amphibian Life Cycle* (a.k.a. Finley & Maya's Super-Perfect Guide to Imperfect Boys).

First we named all the Tadpoles, the squeaky, silly little babies who belonged back in elementary school. Maya and I ignored the Tadpoles as much as possible. But it wasn't easy, because they were incredibly loud and obnoxious, the kind of boys who made fart jokes on the school bus.

Next were the Croakers, the boys who were starting to mature. Have you ever seen an actual tadpole turn into an actual frog? They go through this weird mutant in-between stage when they have fishy tails, but also reptile arms and legs. Croakers had croaky-sounding voices (hence the name), but that wasn't the grossest thing about them: They smelled like wet socks, or else like too much deodorant; they chewed with their mouths open; they stepped on your feet. But at least they talked to girls. Or rather, tried to talk to girls. Most of the boys we knew were Croakers; even in the eighth grade, they were definitely the majority.

Frogs were the highest form of middle school boy. What made a boy a Frog wasn't just that his voice had mostly stopped croaking; it was other stuff, like making eye contact with you in the hallway. Frogs were the boys who shared their homework, who laughed at your jokes, who'd discovered napkins. They weren't perfect, but they used shampoo. You could have a conversation with Frogs; they were the boys you could crush on. I'm not saying you did; I'm saying you could. But Frogs were rare in the eighth grade, and

anyhow, the best ones were usually taken.

Up until today, Wyeth Brockman had been stuck at the Tadpole stage. In fact, considering the squeaky way he giggled, his obsession with LEGOs, the way he blew bubbles with his straw—plus the way he never, ever spoke to girls, even when they asked him a simple question—I thought he'd probably stay a Tadpole forever.

So when he asked Maya if she'd seen that stupid movie, this was definitely the first sign of Croaker behavior. It wasn't just the voice croaking and the blushing; it was the super awkwardness of the whole conversation. I'm seeing a movie you would probably find excruciating. In case you wanted to know.

Let me put it another way: If Wyeth had still been a Tadpole, he wouldn't have mentioned this stupid movie to a girl. He probably wouldn't have mentioned anything to any girl, period.

If he'd become a Frog, he would have added something like, You're welcome to come to the stupid movie. Or even, Would you like to go to the stupid movie with me?

But a Croaker couldn't make it to the invitation part. Maybe Wyeth didn't even realize he wanted to invite Maya. Maybe he just thought he'd share his moviegoing habits out loud, and if a girl such as Maya happened to be listening, well, all righty then.

A.k.a., totally Croaker.

All of this happened in social studies, where our teacher, Mr. Schiavone, had arranged the desks in "work stations" to "facilitate discussion." This month my "work station" consisted of me, Maya, Wyeth, and Jarret Lynch, who was the world's reigning Croaker champion, and also, by the way, not a nice person. No one (besides Maya and me) knew about the Amphibian Life Cycle, so I could have just announced Wyeth's upgrade to Croaker status. But if I had, Jarret would probably have gone, Huh? What are you talking about?

And the thing was, I didn't want to embarrass Wyeth. Or any boy, really; that wasn't the point of the Life Cycle, which was just about dealing with boy immaturity. Which was a major issue, as any girl in middle school can tell you.

So instead I passed Maya a note: CROAK???

She smiled. Then she wrote back: Hmm, mayyyybe . . .

You didn't hear him croak just now? I wrote. On the word "WEEKEND." Plus he kinda/sorta asked you out!!!

Maya rolled her eyes. No, he didn't, Finley. He just said he was seeing a dumb movie.

Me: That's a Croaker invite!

Maya: Please.

Me: I'm putting it on the chart!

She shrugged. And as soon as Mr. Schiavone started assigning the homework, I opened my science binder to the back. I glanced around to make sure no one was looking, especially Jarret. Then I flipped to the Amphibian Life Cycle chart, and next to Wyeth's name I wrote the word "Croaker."

Wyeth Brockman: Croaker.

But yeah, I had to admit it looked funny.

I thought about Maya's objection. We'd been doing the Life Cycle for about five months now, and whenever we upgraded any boy, we usually agreed on the change of status. So maybe she was right, maybe it was too soon for Wyeth—a single croak, a one-time blush, and a super-awkward invitation didn't qualify him for Croaker. And besides, I told myself, just look at him: He was chewing his thumbnail, which was a Tadpole thing to do, especially in public.

Still, Wyeth had made some actual progress today, and it would be wrong to ignore it. When a Tadpole evolved—even a fraction of an iota—it belonged on the chart, even if you couldn't figure exactly how.

So I erased "Croaker." I considered the options. Finally, this is what I wrote:

Wyeth Brockman: Tadpole with Croaker tendencies.

I liked this description; it seemed fair to me, and I felt sure Maya would agree with it eventually.

But even so, I wrote it in pencil, in case I needed to change my mind.