

Though Will Hunting (Matt Damon) has genius-level intelligence (such as a talent for memorizing facts and an intuitive ability to prove sophisticated mathematical theorems), he works as a janitor at MIT and lives alone in a sparsely furnished apartment in an impoverished South Boston neighborhood. An abused foster child, he subconsciously blames himself for his unhappy upbringing and turns this self-loathing into a form of self-sabotage in both his professional and emotional lives. Hence, he is unable to maintain either a steady job or a steady romantic relationship.

The first week of classes, Will solves a difficult graduate-level math problem that Professor Gerald Lambeau (Stellan Skarsgård), a Fields Medalist and combinatorialist, left on a chalkboard as a challenge to his students, hoping someone might solve it by the semester's end. Everyone wonders who solved it, and Lambeau puts another problem on the board -- one that took him and his colleagues two years to prove. Will is discovered in the act of solving it, and Lambeau initially believes that Will is vandalizing the board and chases him away as Will insults him. When Will turns out to have solved it correctly, Lambeau tries to track Will down.

One night after work, Will and his best friend Chuckie and a couple of their other friends go to a bar near Harvard University. At the bar, Chuckie spots a beautiful woman, Skylar (Minnie Driver) and he hits on her, claiming to be a Harvard student himself. One of Skylar's fellow co-eds, Clark (Scott William Winters), tries to humiliate Chuckie, challenging his knowledge of American colonial history. Will steps to Chuckie's defense, matching Clark step-for-step with historical facts he'd memorized. A potential fight is eventually defused and Will finds that Skylar is attracted to him, getting her phone number.

A few days later Will attacks a youth who had bullied him years before in kindergarten, and he now faces imprisonment after hitting a police officer who was responding to the fight -- a tough judge refuses to be tricked by Will's sharp knowledge of law precedent, which includes citing a case from the 1700s. Realizing Will might have the potential to be a great mathematician, such as the genius Évariste Galois, Lambeau intervenes on his behalf, offering him a choice: either Will can go to jail, or he can be released into Lambeau's personal supervision, where he must study mathematics and see a psychotherapist to help him with his anger and defensive personality. Will chooses the latter even though he seems to believe that he does not need therapy.

Five psychologists fail to connect with Will. Out of sheer desperation, Lambeau finally calls on Sean Maguire (Robin Williams), an estranged old friend and MIT classmate of his. Sean differs from his five predecessors in that he is also from South Boston and pushes back at Will and is eventually able to get through to him and his hostile, sarcastic defence mechanisms. At one point, Will analyzes a watercolor painting that Sean had done himself and concludes that it reflects Sean's suppressed feelings and guilt over the premature death of his wife. Sean becomes offended and hostile and grabs Will by the throat, threatening to sink his chances for reform, at which point Will ends the appointment and walks out; Lambeau walks in believing that Will has ruined his chances with yet another therapist. However, Sean sees Will as a challenge and tells Lambeau to bring him back each week.

In a later session, Will is particularly struck when Sean tells him how he gave up his ticket to see the Red Sox in the 1975 World Series (missing Carlton "Pudge" Fisk's famous home run in the Sox infamous "Game 6") in order to meet and spend time with a stranger in a bar, who would later become his wife. Will is spurred to try to establish a relationship with Skylar (Minnie Driver), a young woman he met at a bar near Harvard.

This doctor-patient relationship, however, is far from one-sided. Will challenges Sean in the same way that Sean is encouraging Will to take a good, hard, objective look at himself and his life. Sean's own pathology is that he is unable and unwilling to even consider another romantic relationship in the aftermath of his beloved wife's premature death from cancer several years before, possibly the primary reason why Sean agrees to take Will on as a client.

Meanwhile, Lambeau pushes Will so hard to excel that Will eventually refuses to go to the job interviews that Lambeau has arranged for him for positions that might prove challenging, even to his immense talents. Lambeau and Sean also squabble about Will's future; Sean believes that Lambeau is pushing Will to fast and also points out that Will's friends are the most dedicated and loyal people he associates with. Will's accidental witnessing of this furious quarrel somehow acts as a catalyst for his decision to enter a deeper level of trust and sharing with Sean. He has apparently realized from this event that the situation is a little more complex than Will vs. The World. He now sees that these mentors are every bit as human, fallible, and conflicted as he is.

Skylar asks Will to move to California with her, where she will begin medical school at Stanford. Will panics at the thought. Skylar then expresses support about his past, which is received as patronizing and triggers a tantrum in which Will storms out of the dorm while in a state of undress. He shrugs off the work he's doing for Lambeau as "a joke," even though Lambeau is incapable of solving some of the theorems and admittedly envies Will. Lambeau begs Will not to throw it all away, but Will walks out on him anyway. At a later job interview, Will gives the interviewer a long explanation about why he doesn't want to be a government code-breaker. At another interview, Will sends Chuckie in his place. Chuckie mocks the panel of representatives, even persuading them to give him all the cash they have before mildly threatening them with a call from his attorney.

Sean points out that Will is so adept at anticipating future failure in his personal and romantic relationships, that he either allows them to fizzle out or deliberately bails in order to avoid the risk of future emotional pain. When Will then provides a whimsical reply to Sean's very serious query of what he wants to do with his life, Sean simply shows him the door. When Will further tells his best friend Chuckie (Ben Affleck) that he wants to be a laborer for the rest of his life, Chuckie becomes brutally honest with Will: He believes it's an "insult" for Will to waste his potential as a laborer, and that his recurring wish is to knock on Will's door in the morning when he picks him up for work and find that he just isn't there, that he has left without saying goodbye. Chuckie's honesty hits home with Will more than anyone else's, even a trained professional like Sean.

Will goes to another therapy session, where Sean shares that he was also a victim of child abuse. At first, Will is defensive and resentful at Sean's repeated reassurances that it was not Will's fault that he was so horribly abused and abandoned. Will eventually breaks down in tearful acknowledgement. Finally, after much self-reflection, Will decides to cease being a victim of his own inner demons and to take charge of his life. When his buddies present him with a rebuilt Chevy Nova for his 21st birthday, he decides to go to California and reunite with Skylar, setting aside his lucrative corporate and government job offers.

Will leaves a brief note for Sean explaining what he's doing, using one of Sean's own quips, "I had to go see about a girl." Sean also leaves to travel the world, though not before reconciling with Lambeau. The movie ends as Chuckie poignantly discovers, in fulfillment of his own long-standing wish, that Will has left for a better life. Will is then shown starting his life-affirming drive to California for a new beginning with Skylar and a leap into an unpredictable future.