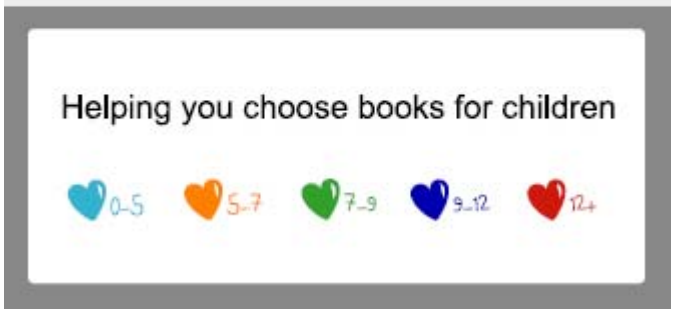
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1

"If this lesson doesn't end soon, I will be forced to jump out of the window to see if I can fly for my own amusement. . ."

You slide down your seat and even further in your typical Monday-morning state: falling asleep in the cosy atmosphere of the English room, listening to your teacher stammer in that annoying way that she does when she's going on about some great work of English literature or something, written by someone important. Not that you care. A turn of your head lets you look at the clock. 10.15 a.m. You sigh and grab your bag from under the desk, shoving the books back into it that you haven't bothered to write in. Miss Phillips is still trying to mutter on in her tiny voice above the noise the class is making. You feel a

little stab of pity for your short, wiry teacher as she tries to regain the grumbling class's attention.

"C-c-class? Hello?" Miss Phillips does a small jump, waving her hand at some guys in the corner of the room who ignore her completely. "H-h-hello? Can I talk to you for a moment p-p-please?"

You lean against the wall, putting in the earphones of your MP3 player. You really don't care about what she is going to say and start to zone out. You don't see the point of English. You can speak it . . . so what's the point in wasting three hours a week on a language you already speak? You don't get it.

Miss Phillips stammers on, pushing her giant, round glasses back up her nose, and running a hand through her thin brown hair. *God, she needs a makeover,* you think.

"So class, h-here's what I was going to say. . ." she stammers on. "The English department have decided that this year for the first time in t-t-ten years, we are going to do a Christmas play." You look up from staring at the floor, your plans of leaving the class as quickly as possible disappearing. You pull out one of your earphones. A play. *Now that's more like it. . .* You listen to her with new interest. "The play will be *Romeo and Juliet.*" The class groans. But you are elated. *Romeo and Juliet* is one of your secret obsessions. When you were still small enough to be read stories by your parents at night, your mum would bring out a thick, ancient book of Shakespeare's plays, and read you extracts until you fell asleep. She always knew that your favourite was *Romeo and Juliet.* You didn't understand the language until you were older, but you could recite parts from

each play from the age of six. Ever since you were little, all you have wanted to do was act. You have known all your life that you were meant to be an actress. And now you have a chance to prove yourself. A small smile creeps up on your face. You can do it.

"M-m-mrs W-walker and I will be holding auditions next Tuesday. I hope to see some of you there. . .?" she trails off. Most of the class have already left.

She looks disappointed. As a rule, you never speak to teachers unless you have to, but now it's time to make an exception. The room is empty. You walk over to the English teacher. She looks up and gives you a distracted smile.

"I'll be there," you say confidently. She smiles, the happiness in her eyes magnified a hundred times because of those massive glasses. "Yeah," you say, shrugging. "Drama is what I do. I'll be there." You start to walk away, but then change your mind, and turn to her at the door. "But that doesn't mean I actually like to *study* Shakespeare. I just like that particular play." You leave the classroom with a smile on your face. A new challenge. You like challenges.

When you get out of the room, you blink in the bright sunlight. Reuben is stood waiting for you, as always, his breath rising in the cold October air.

He smiles as you saunter up to him, your tattered jeans dragging along the ground, your long black coat that you always wear, your straight dark hair in two plaits and a faded green bag slung over your left shoulder. He smirks, his brown hair falling into his eyes.

"Talking to teachers? I thought that was against the rules?"

You give him a playful hit on the shoulder as the two of you walk along. "Rules were made to be broken."

"Even your rules, Ms Anderson?"

"Yes, Mr Lucan. Sometimes there is an exception to the rule, and that would be today."

"What's the special occasion?" He looks at you with feigned apprehension in his deep green eyes. "Are you actually starting to *like* English now? Or did you decide to tell Phillips that her taste in clothes is appalling and that she should have a chat with the Fashion Police before she even THINKS about buying another smock?"

You look at your best friend strolling along beside you, and smile. In all the years you've known him, he's always been the same: witty to the verge of sarcastic, easy-going, caring – almost perfect. You are tall for your age, but he's taller than you. You can remember growing up with him and being so much taller than him, when you would climb trees and build dens together, just the two of you, for hours on end without a care in the world. You smile at the thought of it. That was before hormones kicked in and you realized that Reuben was a boy, and that you liked boys . . . which was about the time that Reuben discovered that he did too. *It's a shame he's gay,* you think. *Or I would be with him in a second.*

He notices you smiling and pulls you into him, his arm slung around your shoulders. "Come on, pet, tell me why you stayed for a chinwag with Little Miss Stuck-in-the-1960s."

You tilt your head up to look him straight in the eye. Your

own bright green eyes sparkle with excitement. "There's gonna be a play," you announce in a low voice, a half-smile playing on your lips. "A *real* play. One that's gonna make my family notice me for once. . ." Your eyes, narrowed in determination, one eyebrow arched, search his. "A challenge."

Reuben smiles at you, messes up your hair and winks. "That's my girl. Make me proud." You smile back. Rueben stops walking and turns in the direction of the cafeteria. "I'm going to the vendors. I know that you can just about stand it, but I need a sugar rush to get through my own English class. You coming with or going straight to maths?"

"I'm gonna go to maths," you decide. You aren't feeling too hungry, and the maths block is ages away. "See you later, yeah?"

Reuben waves and wanders off to the cafeteria. You start the walk down to maths, feeling the excitement bubble inside you. You know that this is a challenge that you can accomplish. *OK,* you think. *There are a few people who could get Juliet. There's Misha Reeves, obviously . . . Kym Kaylio . . . Laura Murphy, too . . . who else?*

Your thoughts are interrupted by someone appearing by your side.

"You look so deep in thought, Jen. Is it because you're trying to think of what to wear when you come out with me to Mercury on Friday night?"

Inwardly, you groan. That voice is unmistakable. The person is Steve Watts: the pretentious Year Twelve student, part-time stalker and full-time prat. A prat like most of the guys in the school – Year Twelve or not. Wherever you are, whatever you're

doing, he turns up and pesters you for a date. He just won't leave you alone. Every time he comes over it makes you cringe. *It's not that he's bad looking,* you think. *In fact, he's quite good-looking, but he just thinks that he's God's gift, and that I will melt to the floor as soon as he talks to me. No way!*

Steve is tall and muscular with a great smile, and he is a smooth talker. When he turns on the charm, girls do whatever he asks. When he gets bored, which is about a week later, he moves on to the next one. The stupid thing is that girls still go for him. It makes you so mad that he uses people like that, and every time he talks to you, you want to gag. This boy is all about the chase. Unfortunately, you are the one being chased at the present.

You sigh and speed up. "I'm actually thinking about what I'm going to wear when I stay at home *without* you on Friday night. I told you that I'm not going out with you; not *this* Friday, *next* Friday, or any other Friday as long as I live."

He laughs, easily keeping up with your fast pace because of his long legs. "You're just teasing me. I know you want to come out with me. I mean, who *doesn't*? You don't need to worry about getting into the club – I've got a job there, I can get you in. You've got no excuse, so don't drag this out – just say yes."

You click your tongue with irritation and stop suddenly. He stops too, grinning, thinking that this is just a game. It makes you even angrier.

"Look – why can't you get that I don't want to spend five minutes with you, let alone a whole evening, and that I am saying *no* because I *mean* no? So no, I won't say yes, 'cause I've already said NO! Just leave it, OK?!"

Steve looks at you with a confused expression for a second, then it clears. "OK," he says. "Whatever."

You sigh with relief. *Thank the Lord I got through that thick skull of his.* "Thanks. And sorry."

"Oh, don't say sorry," he says, with a glint in his eye. "We are right for each other. You'll see that soon enough. And I'm not gonna give up. One Friday you *are* gonna come out with me. I don't doubt it. See you tomorrow, Jen."

With that, Steve turns around and strides off to the Year Twelve area, leaving you angry enough to tear out your hair. You feel like you are Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*, and that Steve is the muscled moron Gaston. *What is wrong with him?!*

You head off towards maths, silently roaring with rage. When you reach the room, you sit in your seat and open a book. You've never been so pleased to see algebraic equations. At the moment, anything is better than dwelling on Steve Watts and his over-inflated ego.

It's Tuesday. You're standing with a group of other nervous Year Eleven girls just offstage, waiting to audition for the part of Juliet. You look around at the other hopefuls, at their slightly pale faces and sweating palms – you can practically hear their racing pulses echoing in the confined space. But you are calm. A familiar buzz starts to take over your body – the buzz that you get any time you are about to go and act everyone else off the stage. You smile. Your palms are dry, pulse normal, and the soliloquy you have memorized is as fresh in your mind as if you had just thought of it yourself. You were meant to play this

part, you can feel it. Excitement washes over you as the previous girl finishes her small scene, and walks off the stage.

"Jen? Jen Anderson?" Miss Phillips calls your name, and you brush past the others and on to the bright lights of the stage. You don't blink in the sudden exposure to light; you confidently walk straight into the middle of the stage and stand expressionless, waiting for one of the two English teachers to speak. Mrs Walker leans forward in her chair, her clipboard on knee, pen in hand.

"So, Jen, what have you prepared for us?"

You give a small smile and walk forward, handing a photocopy of your passage to Miss Phillips. "Act Three, Scene Two: Juliet's soliloquy."

Mrs Walker looks over at the paper, nods, and replies, "Go ahead."

You walk back to centre stage, and take a deep breath. Someone hidden in the darkness of the hall whistles, and you bite back a smile. Reuben always has to show off at the most inappropriate moments. You look up, and suddenly feel the emotion of one of the most legendary martyrs for love in history flow through your veins. You let Juliet's love for Romeo become your love for Romeo. You let Juliet become you, and you become Juliet. Everything else in this moment becomes a distant memory, a different life. You are Juliet all those hundreds of years ago; telling yourself how lucky you are, how in love you are, and how much your Romeo loves you. Their powerful emotions wash over you. You start to speak.

"Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds,"

You're wanting the night to come faster, faster.

"Towards Phoebus' lodging; such a waggoner,
As Phaethon would whip you to the west,"

Praying to the gods to help you in your lust.

"And bring in cloudy night immediately."

Making sure he finds you in secret, making sure he is unseen.

"Spread thy close curtain, love-performing night,"

So that no one knows tonight's the night you'll go all the way.

"That runaway's eyes may wink and Romeo
Leap to these arms, untalked of and unseen. . ."

Let no one know, let our bodies be one, let us be alone tonight. . .

As Juliet begs for the day to be over and her night with Romeo to arrive, your voice is both soft and urgent. The words of Shakespeare flow off your tongue as if they had come straight from a heart so full of love and urgency it could burst. As you carry on reciting your piece, the girls rehearsing their lines in

whispers in the wings stand still in an amazed silence, staring at you with a mixture of jealousy and awe. The people hanging around the back of the hall stop talking. Miss Phillips and Mrs Walker look like all their dreams have come true at once. But you don't care. You carry on with your passage, oblivious to everyone's reaction, so involved in your role that nothing else matters. You come to the closing lines of your audition.

"And she brings news; and every tongue that speaks
But Romeo's name speaks heavenly eloquence."

The room is silent. You come out of character, and stand under the lights that suddenly feel a little too bright. You look over at Miss Phillips. A single tear trickles down her pale cheek. Mrs Walker is stunned still. Everyone, in fact, has frozen. It's so quiet you almost think that you have gone deaf. Then Miss Phillips begins to applaud. A slow, deliberate, praising applause. Mrs Walker joins in. And so does the rest of the cast. You hear Reuben's celebratory whistle over the ringing claps, and your face breaks into a large smile. Cheers sound out, and Mrs Walker steps up on to the stage.

She holds out her hand for you to shake. "Congratulations," she whispers in your ear. "Well done, Juliet."