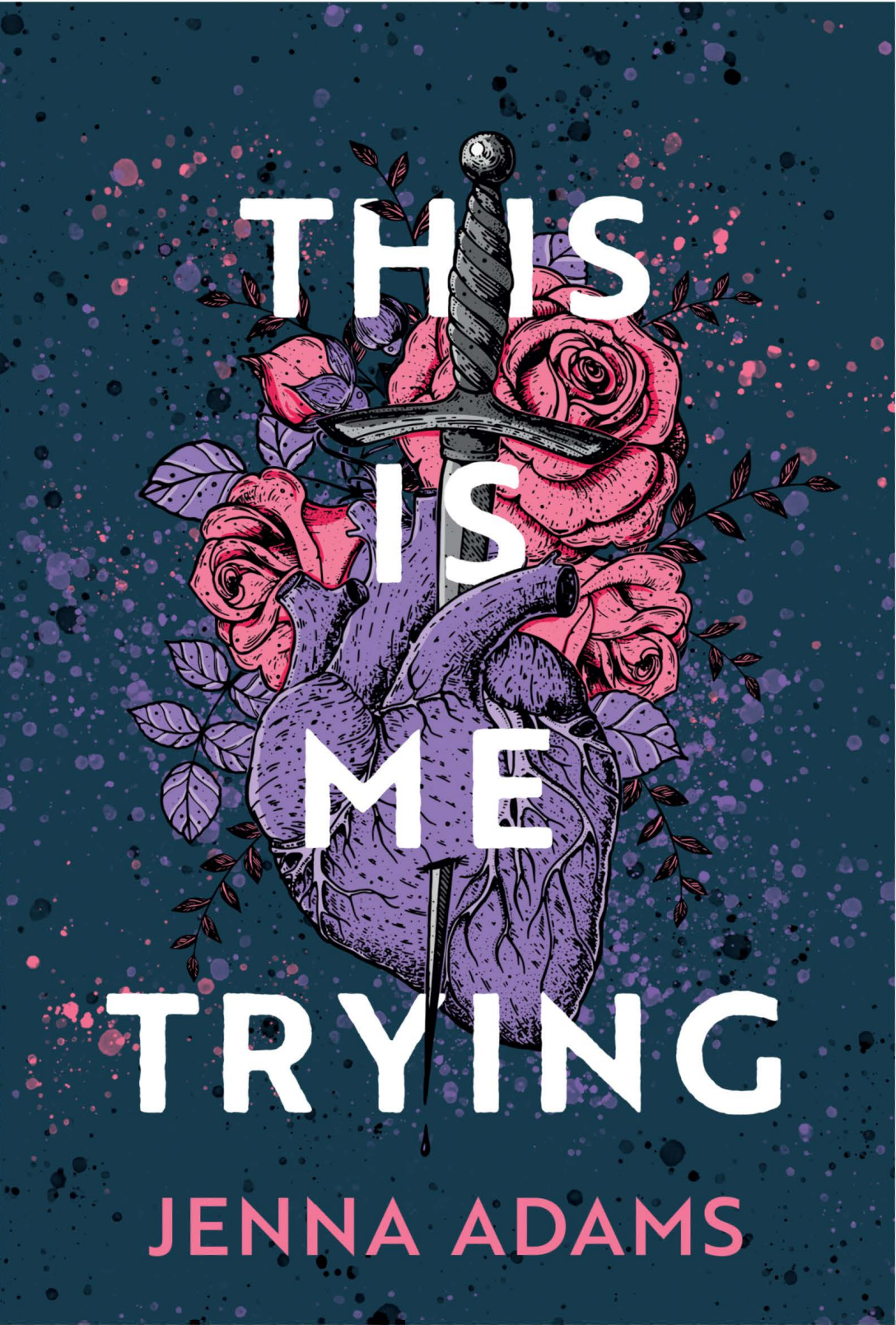

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IS
ME
TRYING
JENNA ADAMS

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Content warning:
This book contains material which some readers may find distressing, including discussion of suicide and suicidal ideations, statutory rape, depression, substance abuse, toxic relationships, and description of deliberate self-injury.

THIS IS ME TRYING

JENNA ADAMS



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This Is Me Trying
by Jenna Adams

PB • 9781917275101 • £9.99/$15.95 • 432pp • YA 14+
UK & Europe: 17 July 2025
USA & RoW: 14 October 2025

Distributed in the UK & Europe by PGUK/Macmillan
and in the USA & RoW by Consortium/Ingram

#ThisIsMeTrying @JennaAdamsBooks

Neem Tree Press, an imprint of Unbound

Sales: Gemma@unbound.com
Publicity: Rina@unbound.com

www.unbound.com

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PROLOGUE

2018

BROOKE, 22

'I would describe your tendencies as codependent,' Sanjay said.

I looked up. He was sitting on one of those big, comfy armchairs in front of the window, silhouetted by the light behind him. I had to squint to try and make eye contact. *All his clients must struggle when the sun comes through,* I thought. *Maybe someone should tell him.*

'Codependent?' I said.

He nodded slowly. All his movements were measured, his words too. There was something reassuring about them, even if I couldn't make out his face. 'Do you know what that means?'

'No. I've heard of it, but not really.'

'It means a one-sided relationship. In simple terms, you've got the needy codependent, and the narcissist or addict. I'm not saying that Charlie is a narcissist or an addict, that's just a typical example. But there's a dynamic, one where you are dependent on external sources of love in order to be okay. Would you say you were dependent on Charlie's love?'

I paused for a second. 'Yes. To an extent.'

I expected him to fill the silence, and as usual, he didn't. *Do therapists get all these qualifications and charge all this money just to sit there and not say anything?*

'But aren't most people in relationships a little bit dependent on each other?'

'Absolutely, otherwise we'd all walk out of a breakup unscathed. There's practical dependence, perhaps where one partner is a homemaker and the other earns the income; take one away through death or breakup and you're left with

a person who isn't able to look after themselves properly. And then there's also *emotional* dependence, which I think is relevant to you, Brooke. The goal is to keep things at a healthy level, enough to say, "I love you, but if I had to be alone, I know I'd be okay".'

I looked down at my hands, my fingers twisting around themselves. 'I'd die if Charlie left me.'

'That's what I'd like to work on with you. I'm not saying we have to be in a situation where you *are* alone. But I think it would be useful to work on your self-esteem, and draw it from yourself, rather than from things outside of you.'

I looked up at him again. The sun was blazing. I could just make out his legs crossed lazily, his hands dangling over the arms of the chair. I looked back down at my fingers. 'That would be nice,' I mumbled.

'You said your parents separated when you were young.'

'Ten. Divorced by twelve.'

'And after that separation, how involved was your father in your life?'

'About as involved as he was before they split. Which is to say, not very.'

'That must've been hard,' Sanjay said. 'I wonder if that left you with space that requires filling, so when you enter a new relationship, you already enter needing. Which makes it hard for you to leave, even when it's not working out, because you're relying on this other person to give you love. You're not giving it to yourself.'

More silence. I kept my eyes fixed on my hands. He kept his fixed on me. At least, I thought so. That damn window.

'I would be interested to know about any significant relationships that you had prior to Charlie, if that's okay for you to talk about. Maybe we'll see some patterns emerging.'

I stiffened.

'You seemed to have a reaction to that,' Sanjay said.

'It's just…' I sighed. 'I never… I've never talked to anyone about this before.'

'Therapy is—'

'I've done therapy before. I've talked about… my feelings.'

'An old boyfriend?'

I nodded.

'Would you say you were dependent on his affection?'

'Very,' I said.

Sanjay paused. 'Well, when you're ready.'

I didn't say anything for a long time. *How am I supposed to talk about what happened?* 'I was a teenager. I was fourteen.'

'Uh huh.'

'He was… seventeen, I think. When I first… when we first…'

Sanjay nodded. 'What was his name?'

I looked up. 'His name was Matt.'

ACT 1: 14 | 17

2010

SCENE 1: MATT, 17

'He's gonna get ID'ed,' Fliss whined.

'I'm not gonna get ID'ed,' I said.

'I just don't want to get kicked out. We've drunk tinnies in my living room one too many times now.'

'He'll be fine,' her twin brother Simon said, swinging open the door to The Anchor.

'You won't go up to the bar, will you Matt?' Fliss looked worried.

'I won't go up to the bar,' I repeated.

She led me to a secluded booth in the far corner while Simon flashed his perfectly valid ID at the barman. A minute later, he deposited three ciders on the table. 'So, did you say you had an audition today?'

I nodded and took a sip. 'I kind of want a big part. It'll be my last Stagefright show before uni.'

'I'll never understand how you can do all that without getting nervous,' he said. 'Get on stage, say all those lines and shit.'

'Well, when you put it like that, there's not much to it,' I laughed.

Fliss checked her phone. 'Ellie and Georgia are on their way.'

I glanced at my phone too. I had a new email.

'Oof, cast list is out,' I said. Fliss and Simon looked at me as I opened the attachment. The top line read the words *ROMEO: Matt Williams.*

'What did you get?' Fliss asked.

'I got Romeo,' I said, trying not to sound too pleased with myself.

Simon said, 'Waheeey,' at the same time Fliss said, 'Well done!'

'Thanks.' I put the phone down and sipped my drink.

'Who's Juliet?' Fliss asked.

'Erm…' I picked the phone back up. 'Brooke Tyler.'

'Who? Is she in our year?'

'No, she's a bit younger,' I said. 'She only joined a few months ago. I think her sister's the year below us.'

Simon nodded. 'Amy Tyler.'

'Jesus, you really do know every girl in sixth form, don't you?' Fliss rolled her eyes.

Simon raised his glass quickly. 'Let's toast to the fact that we're gonna have to pretend we don't hate Shakespeare for three months and then pay seven quid to watch Matt die on a church hall stage.'

'Cheers to that,' I laughed.

*

That Wednesday was the first full-cast rehearsal in the Connell Complex, a glorified community hall. In this small town there wasn't a lot to do other than amateur theatre, so Stagefright was just one of many drama groups that had popped up over the years. Several people had already arrived by the time I walked up the stairs and into the rehearsal room. My friend Lewis, a huge rugby player who'd been cast as Romeo's father, greeted me with a clap on the back that almost winded me. 'My son! Congrats, leading man!'

'Hi Lewis.'

'You're officially my child now. Prepare for some serious patronising.'

'You're, like, two years older than me.'

'And don't you forget it,' he grinned, then leaned in so his voice wouldn't carry. 'I've gotta say, I'm surprised at Juliet. Brooke Tyler? Against, like, Tilly?'

'Was Tilly upset she didn't get it?'

'I dunno, mate. I just thought Brooke was an outside shout. She seems so shy. Tilly's older, been in loads of shows, we all know she can act.'

'Yeah, and now she's got to act with *you*. No wonder she's upset.'

Just then, Brooke walked in wearing denim shorts that were a little too large for her. She was tall and slim, with pale skin

and long, brown hair. Lucy, a girl in her year, greeted her with a hug. Over Lucy's shoulder I saw her glance at me, then look away quickly.

When everyone had arrived, we pulled up chairs while the directors handed out copies of *Romeo and Juliet*. I glanced around and saw Brooke, safely shielded next to Lucy. Despite being one of the taller girls, she seemed to shrink into herself.

'Do you see what I mean, mate?' Lewis whispered to me. 'She's so quiet. If she doesn't loosen up, she's gonna be a ballache for you to act with.'

'Give her a chance,' I hissed.

'We'll end up doing *Romeo and,'* he went on. 'Just *Romeo and,* no Juliet. I suppose we could have *Romeo and Friar Laurence*—'

'Today,' the director Stephen began, 'we're just going to talk about your characters and build up a background for them. What are their traits? What's their favourite food? Do they have an accent?'

'*Oui oui*!' said Callum, Lucy's older brother, who was playing Count Paris. 'My guy's French, isn't he?'

'Actually, everyone's Italian,' Meg, the second director, explained. 'But you can be French if you want.'

'We'll get to characters in a minute. For now, pair up with someone you're acting with. So Romeo with Juliet, Mr and Mrs Capulet, that kind of thing. You'll be working together a lot over the next three months, so come up with five facts about yourself and get to know each other. Off you go, then.'

I looked at Brooke, but she was avoiding my eyes, watching Lucy wander off with someone else. As I picked up my chair and moved to sit by her, I saw her looking around, looking at her phone, looking anywhere but at me. When I finally put my chair down, her eyes reluctantly slid onto mine.

'Hi,' I smiled warmly.

'Hi,' she said, her voice cracking.

'Five facts,' I said. 'I hate this game. We do it in lessons all the time.'

She attempted a laugh, but it came out more as a cough.

I carried on. 'Normally I just say I was a Christmas pudding in a school play.'

She smiled. 'I normally go with the fact I've never had salt and vinegar crisps.'

'You've *never* had salt and vinegar?'

She shrugged.

'Huh,' I said, and the conversation died. *Lewis was right,* I thought, *this is going to be a ballache.*

Finally, she said, 'Are you doing A-Levels?'

'Maths, Chemistry, and Drama. Does that count as three facts?' I spoke with performed enthusiasm, trying to put her at ease.

'I'm taking Drama too.' She lit up. 'For GCSE next year, with Sociology and Art. That's two facts each. And I'd like to be an actor one day, that's my third. What about you? What do you want to be?'

'Erm,' I sighed, not wanting to think about my conditional university offers. 'Something in Chemistry. That's what I've applied to do at uni.'

'So, a scientist?'

'I have no idea. I just picked something I'm good at.'

'Okay, so your third fact is that you maybe want to be a scientist, but not for definite.' She seemed to have relaxed a little.

'And my fourth is that I'm not very good at explaining things!'

She laughed. 'Yeah, me too. I'm not very good at talking. That's my fourth.' She retreated into herself a little. That confident moment I'd been nurturing coming to an abrupt end.

'I think you're easy to talk to,' I said, even though I didn't.

Her face brightened, and she looked at me for a long moment. I jumped to break the silence.

'And five… um… what's your middle name?'

'Maria.'

'Mine's James. Good! Five facts all done.' I gave her what I hoped was a reassuring smile.

The silence hung for a little too long, and again I saw her look down. I extended my hand. 'Nice to meet you, Brooke Maria Tyler.'

'Nice to meet you, Matthew James Williams.' She shook it, brightening again.

'Now talk about your character's details,' Stephen called out over the volume of discussion. 'Accents, age, family, hobbies, anything you can think of.'

I looked at Brooke, eager to keep her chatting, to keep her from getting shy again. 'So, an accent for Juliet?'

'Probably English. Romeo?'

'English too. I can't do any others.' I laughed, and she smiled.

After a pause, she added, 'I don't know how to act older than I am.'

'Juliet's fourteen, well, thirteen, in the real play.'

'Oh, okay. I thought she was meant to be a lot older than me.'

'There's a line where the nurse said she's not quite fourteen, and Romeo could be anything from sixteen to, like, twenty-five. So, you're perfect for the part. Here, I'll show you.'

I opened the script in my hand, flicking through in search of the line. When I gave up and turned back to her, Brooke had been studying my motions and was now looking at me expectantly.

'Family,' I went on, for something to say. 'That's easy, Capulets and Montagues. Hobbies…'

'I guess mine could be standing on a balcony wondering where Romeo is,' she laughed, and I laughed too, a little harder than expected.

'Fun fact: "wherefore" doesn't actually mean "where," it means, "why." So, when she says, "wherefore art thou, Romeo," she's saying, "why are you Romeo, why are you a Montague?" Common misconception.'

'That's what I said!' Brooke was suddenly animated. 'But Callum kept saying I was wrong—he'll believe me now that a *guy* agrees with me.'

'Callum, as in, Lucy's brother?' I glanced over at the lanky sixteen-year-old chatting away in French to his partner, who didn't look impressed.

'Yeah, so he's basically my brother too. A sexist one,' Brooke laughed.

'Don't let him wind you up,' I smiled. 'He doesn't deserve the satisfaction.'

When the session ended, Lewis invited me into Bristol. 'Rugby night out. We're going to Thekla. You wanna come?'

'Can't, mate. They ID everywhere in the city. I'll have to settle for sitting at the back of The Anchor and keeping my head down.'

'Ah, not long now dude. I'm gonna give you an eighteenth to remember—or one you can't remember at all, more like. How was your session anyway, chatting to Juliet?'

'Yeah, it was fine. Y'know, I think you're wrong about her. She just needs a little encouragement to come out of her shell.'

'If you say so. See you next week, bro—unless you want to go out tomorrow night?'

'Still seventeen, Lewis.'

'I'm just messing.'

I followed him towards the door, jacket in hand. Brooke was chatting with Lucy, but turned to me as I passed.

'Nice one, Juliet,' I said, offering her a high five. 'See you next week.'

'Yeah,' she said, 'see you next week, Romeo.'

SCENE 2: BROOKE, 14

'Younger zan she are 'appy mothers made,' Callum was saying.

'This will be the death of me,' Lucy whispered. 'At breakfast. At dinner. In his bedroom. He's always doing a French accent. And not even a good one.'

'What are you girls whispering about?' Callum spun back to us.

'Nothing,' Lucy said quickly.

'Rien,' I said, and we both snorted.

We were walking to rehearsal, and I felt my stomach squirm with every step I took. I don't know what it was about Stagefright that gave me… well, stage fright. I'd had big parts in school plays before, but I'd always been one of the oldest people in those casts. At Stagefright I was the youngest, by a long shot. Some of the people there were in sixth form, and a few were even in their twenties. When I'd got the part, I'd been so excited, and started learning my lines right away. But that first rehearsal, I'd walked in and shrunk. They all seemed so confident, like they knew everyone else, and I had barely spoken to anyone other than Lucy and Callum. It felt like a lot was expected of me, but Matt had helped. He'd said I was perfect for the part, he'd laughed at my jokes, and he seemed to like me.

We walked in and I felt my arms close around myself again. Callum shot off to chat to Kyle, and Lucy and I hovered at the edge of the room. I told myself I had to be braver today and dropped my arms to my side.

Matt walked in behind me. When I turned to look at him, we locked eyes, and my heart pounded. He was tall and slim in his T-shirt and jeans, with light skin, bright blue eyes, and messy curls that tickled the tops of his ears. 'Hi,' he said, giving me a big smile.

'Hi,' I said brightly, trying to find my confidence, and before I knew it, he was hugging me. I had to get up on my toes to reach around his neck. As I drew back, he smiled, and my stomach flipped.

The session started as usual with some warmup games, but then Meg took me and Matt over to one side.

'We know we didn't ask you to sing in the audition, but we want you to do *Taking Chances* in the show, when Romeo and Juliet meet. How does that sound?'

We spent the next twenty minutes downstairs with Stephen going through vocal warmups, looking at sheet music, and practising harmonies. Singing in front of Matt made me self-conscious and I was aware that I wanted to impress him. I'd heard him sing in the Easter showcase we'd done right before I auditioned for *Romeo and Juliet*, but I'd never heard him sing so close to me.

I realised how much the lyrics related to us as well as to our characters. I was singing about how little I knew him; he was singing about how his future was unplanned, with his university options and uncertain career. Together we sang about how Romeo and Juliet were taking a leap of faith in pursuing an unlikely romance. And as we sang, as he looked at me with those bright blue eyes, I couldn't help but imagine it was about me and Matt instead. It was just a daydream while we sang, but I was lost in it, imagining some dramatic, passionate love affair against all the odds, against all the people who would say we shouldn't be together, just like Romeo and Juliet.

I looked at Matt, and he smiled as we sang together, and I thought about how it felt when I hugged him, and how he'd managed to get me to open up in our first ever conversation, and how I'd been excited to see him again. I felt so different around him: more relaxed, more confident. He was having an effect on me. *Am I having an effect on him?*

Right then and there, I fell for Matt Williams.