

stress strategies every
teenager needs to know

COOLING DOWN TEEN STRESS

by Delight Johnston Chandler
with Cameron Johnston



Writer's Digest said . . .

"This is a very well-written book, especially because the author is a teenager! Phrasing and word choice are age and culture appropriate."

A teacher and her Year 12 class said . . .

"When I saw *Cooling Down Teen Stress*, I knew instantly that I wanted to use it in my classroom. The students were captivated by the story line and enjoyed completing the worksheets. They became familiar with the strategies for coping with stress and commented on how practical they were. The format of the book kept their interest and provided variety. I plan to use this book again with my next year's class."

—D Brown, High School Teacher, Perth, WA

"I give this book 10/10. I really enjoyed the book and how it uses someone's life in the story and gives ideas on how to stay unstressed and calm. It is set out nicely, is easy to read and gets the point across in a really short book."

"I enjoyed the book because it relates to the stuff we're going through at the moment. It discusses issues we teens are facing and gives practical activities that help us."

"After I read this book, I realised how much it made me feel like I wanted to change some of my bad habits. I enjoyed every page of the book, even the sad parts, because I could actually place myself in some of the situations. I feel that this book could change the views and opinions of most teens if they had the chance to read it."

"I quite enjoyed this book and found it relevant to my life with some useful stress-relief strategies."

"I enjoyed the book and I think it is very relevant to today's teens and the problems they face day to day. It is an interesting story that kept me wanting to read on to find out what happened. I could relate to some of the same situations as Derisa, so that also kept me captivated. I enjoyed the encouragement, tips and strategies and found them helpful and actually do-able, which was great."

"I enjoyed the book and found it very reassuring in that it covered many of the stresses in my own life. I was able to relate to Derisa and learned that the things that stress me are not that unusual. The book is very useful and a good tool for teens because it teaches how to deal with the stresses of teen life."

"I enjoyed the book because it is a great story and it also helped me get over a stressful patch with practical strategies."

Chaplain and youth leader comments . . .

"One of those rare books which addresses in a practical way the life issues and stressors facing teens today and tells a good story in the mix."

—P Fowler, High School Chaplain and Youth Leader, Perth, WA

"I highly recommend *Cooling Down Teen Stress*. It is a cross between a teen fiction story and self-help book and deals with the stresses in the life of the typical teen. It offers solid, no-nonsense guidance and advice on a range of issues including dealing with grief, drug use and abuse, peer issues, popularity, career choice and just surviving school. Each chapter in the story is followed by interactive activities designed to get teens thinking and working through their problems."

—T Knight, National Director, Adventist Youth Ministries, Melbourne, Vic.

Educators and school counsellors said . . .

"The book is well laid out and effective in dealing with teen stress issues. The narrative approach is unique with good advice that is suitable for students in any school system."

—Rick S, British Columbia, Canada

"Students become engrossed in their reading of this book. Even during classes, it is often difficult to get them to put it down. It takes a realistic view of the pressures that teens face in today's society. With minimal guidance, it allows teens to develop their own solutions to problems. Many teens are reluctant to become vulnerable in sharing their personal struggles. For this type of student, the book is fantastic. It allows them to maintain their dignity while addressing uncomfortable situations. In our classrooms, students responded to this book with excitement.

The activities at the end of the chapters intrigued them and kept them glued to the story line. It is a great book for discussion within the class, and can open the way for dialoguing on other relevant issues not directly discussed in the book.

Through this book, students learned many coping mechanisms. They were excited to be able to relate to the issues that were presented and felt that the coping strategies were realistic and achievable. One student says, 'It helped me understand not only myself better but others too. It taught me to communicate my feelings and other ways of dealing with how I feel.'

—Julie B, Principal, Mamawi Atosketan Native School, Hobbema, Alberta, Canada

"We use *Cooling Down Teen Stress* with our students. It is required reading for my peer counselling students so they can learn skills for managing their own stress, as well as for helping fellow students who are feeling overwhelmed. I highly recommend this book for its practical, easy-to-read approach to teen stress management. The students enjoy the story approach and they easily identify with the girl in the story because she faces many of the same stressors that high school students deal with on a daily basis. This also seems to make the concepts easy for them to remember and apply. In student book reviews, they often recommend this book as one that all students should read."

—C Sumerlin, Guidance Counsellor, Milo Academy, Days Creek, Oregon, USA

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PREFACE

Youth is a wonderful state of mind. It is creative, optimistic, idealistic, daring and energetic. This state can be observed at any stage of life, but it is especially apparent between ages 13 and 19.

The teen years are indeed unique. Graciously, they are limited to only seven years of life's journey, which for some is a hormonal endurance test with nightmarish experiences. I know both teens and parents who have been to hell and back a number of times during these years. For some teens, the cause has been parents who are less than understanding; on the other hand, the best of parents can be tested to the core.

My daughter, Delight, passed the teen test with flying colours, and her mother and I are extremely proud of both her and her sister, Melanie, who also completed the teen journey well. As parents, watching our teen girls blossom into womanhood was a really positive and marvellous experience. While the process had its challenges, we were blessed and were spared the worst. In fact, on many occasions, when people learned we were experiencing the teen years with our two girls they would offer sympathy, but we were thankful that we didn't need it.

The idea of writing a book targeting stress management for teens and their parents was a longtime dream of mine. As I watched Delight experience the unique growth challenges of the teen years and her development as a potential writer, I knew she was the one to write this book—while still a teen. The summer after her first year at university provided a prime opportunity, as she could not find a summer job. With the help of her grandfather Covey ("Grampie way down"), who was willing to advance a small loan to provide the incentive, the basic writing got done.

Cooling Down Teen Stress is written as a delightful but realistic story, packed with insights that will help both teens and their parents enjoy, as much as possible, the glorious challenges and developments of the important teen years.

For the teens reading this, I encourage you to make the best of this

exciting time of life. Cut yourself, your friends and your parents some slack, as both the best and the worst times will pass.

For parents, teachers and other caring adults reading this: love your teens, cut them the slack they need to gain their independence and enjoy the process. After all, the chances are very good that even the most challenging teens will eventually grow up to be model citizens. Just look at how you and your generation turned out!

It is exciting to see a new edition of this book being published in Australia and now available for a whole new group of teens. Delight and I hope this will be a great source of encouragement to both teens, their parents and teachers.

Cameron Johnston
British Columbia, Canada
July, 2020

INTRODUCTION

I wrote *Cooling Down Teen Stress* during the summer after my first year of university. I was 19 years old and wrote mainly from my own experience. Some of the incidents in this book actually happened to me.

I had my own personal struggles throughout high school—as everyone does. Without the support of my parents and some close friends, I am not at all certain that I would have made it through my teen years as well as I did.

I hope that this book will help other families—especially teens, but also their parents—as they cope with the unique stresses of the teen years. I hope that teens will apply my stress management strategies to their own experiences, to help them face the challenges of everyday life.

I currently work as an emergency room nurse—a dream of mine since primary school. I made my dream happen! I am also married and have two amazing daughters, who will be teenagers in a few years. So, sharing the best ways to handle teen stress is still very important to me.

The world has changed a lot since this book was first published in 2002, but learning how to cope with and manage stress is even more important today than ever and the principles we share still work. This new edition has been updated with the help of our editor Lauren Webb to include some stressors, like technology misuse, which weren't a problem when I first wrote this story.

HANG IN THERE! Life is too valuable to let difficulties cause you to give up. I want to encourage you to choose excellent and challenging goals and dreams and to work with determination to make them come true. Have fun and enjoy the good times, and deal constructively with the difficult periods. Take life one day at a time. Not all stress is bad for you, but be careful with your time and priorities. Accept yourself for the beautiful person you are—an evolving work of art.

Delight Johnston Chandler

Wife, Mother and Emergency Nurse, Chattanooga, Tennessee, USA

July, 2020

CHAPTER 1

Derisa Moore's ponytail bounced as she hurried through the crowded hallway. As she turned a corner to head up the stairs she bumped into someone, but he caught her before she fell.

"Thanks," Derisa said, trying to regain her composure, as she looked up into Tyler Morgan's blue eyes.

"Sorry for bumping into you, Derisa," he said, his hand still on her shoulder.

"It's OK. Don't worry about it," she replied. "I'd better hurry. I'm going to be late for biology."

She shifted the books that were under her arm and gave him a confident smile. She turned and headed up the stairs without looking back.

She opened the door to the classroom and, as she expected, the class was already seated. She spotted her best friend, Lauren, near the back of the class giving her a look of amusement. Derisa grinned at her and walked towards an empty desk. Class began just as she sat down.

As soon as class was over, Lauren caught up with her.

"Where were you? I waited for-e-e-ever!" she asked, overemphasising the word. Derisa laughed and started to explain.

"Mr Allen needed some information about the banquet. I couldn't escape from all his questions." She paused, but only momentarily. Laughing, she added, "Then I almost broke my leg on my way to class."

Lauren smiled and rolled her eyes at Derisa's dramatic face. "Anyway, should we go and get some supplies? We both have free periods right now . . ."

"Yeah, we could go now," Derisa replied, her mind running through all the things she had to do. "I'm going to drop off my books and grab my bag. I'll meet you at my car in five minutes."

"Alright. Sounds like a plan." Lauren playfully pushed Derisa towards her locker. "Be quick."

Derisa worked her way expertly through the crowded hallway to her locker. Her mind tried to organise the thoughts that tumbled over each

other. She was the student association president and it was also her final year of high school. Her marks had become more important than ever, and she was now responsible for planning the social life of her school. Sometimes the task seemed overwhelming. She remembered the election only a few months earlier. It had become a popularity contest that, fortunately, she had won. But it had been so close. There were others who could do this job well too. Now, as the first banquet of the year was approaching, people were watching to see if she'd mess up. Mentally she reviewed her list of things to do. *I've got to pick up the decorating supplies, she thought, buy helium balloons, and finalise who will perform the music during the banquet.*

"Derisa!" Hearing her name caused her to jump. She looked up and saw Megan.

"What? You almost gave me a heart attack!" Derisa scolded her friend, but her eyes were laughing.

"I tried getting your attention, but you were in your own little world," Megan replied smiling.

"I'm sorry," Derisa said. "I've just got a lot on my mind."

"No problem," Megan said, looking at her sympathetically. "I was just wondering if we could get together to study for biology?" Megan waited for an answer.

"I don't know. I've got a lot to organise for the banquet at the moment. Can I call you?" Derisa knew Lauren would be waiting at the car already. She shut her locker door and started walking. Megan fell into step.

"OK, but we've only got two days until the test," she replied.

"You're right," Derisa sighed. She did need to study for the test. "How about tonight? Will that work? You can come over to my place."

"Perfect. Around 7.30?"

"OK. See you tonight!" Derisa called over her shoulder as she headed through the main doors. She spotted Lauren's bright yellow shirt and hurried towards the car.

"You're easy to spot with that shirt on," Derisa said with a smile as she unlocked the car.

"What? You don't like my shirt?" Lauren pretended to be hurt.

"You know I love it. I might not wear it, but it's definitely you," Derisa replied.

"Thanks. I can always count on you to make me feel special," Lauren said with good-natured sarcasm.

Derisa grinned at her best friend. They'd only known each other for two years but they had been best friends from the moment they met.

They drove around town, stopping at different stores and comparing prices of decorations for the banquet. By the time they had finished, they were tired and frustrated.

"Why do we need to have that type of candle? The other ones would be fine," Lauren complained. "They would look just as nice."

"But Mrs Brown said they won't last as long," Derisa was frustrated. They had to stay within budget and buying the supplies was turning out to be more expensive than they planned.

"Let's head back to school. We'll ask her tomorrow. Maybe she can help us figure this stuff out." Lauren was right. They'd figure it all out tomorrow.

After their last class, Derisa gathered up her books. In the hall, she was constantly interrupted with questions about the banquet. Then Lauren came over to her, just as she finally shut her locker.

"You've got to come with me. Rick and Daniel want to go out for coffee with us." Lauren's excitement was obvious. Rick and Daniel were good-looking guys and seemed to be fun, but Derisa and Lauren didn't have many classes with them.

"I have to go to work." Derisa gave her a knowing look. "Otherwise I would."

"Please . . . just this once. I've wanted to hang out with Rick for so long," Lauren begged. "I need you to come."

"I'm sorry, but I've got to work." Derisa gave her friend a hug. "You'll be OK."

"I guess." Lauren squeezed her friend's hand. "I'm so nervous!"

"Tell me all about it tonight." Derisa smiled and gave her another reassuring hug.

"So, you're coming for coffee?" Daniel had come up behind them and put his arm around Derisa.

"I have to work." Derisa moved out from under his arm and gave him her most charming smile. "You know I'd love to. But I can't. Sorry!"

Daniel put a crushed look on his face. "You're turning me down?" he asked, sounding as though it was unthinkable.

"I'm sure you'll get over it." Derisa laughed at his cockiness and started to walk away. She turned around and waved. "You kids have fun!"

•••

Finally her shift was over. She pulled her ponytail out of the baseball cap she was required to wear at the fast-food restaurant where she worked. The smell of the food was making her feel sick. She looked at her phone. There was a message from Megan: *Running a bit late. See you at 7.45.*

Outside, the evening air made her feel a bit better but she groaned as she thought about studying. By the time she showered, she wouldn't have any time to unwind before Megan arrived. Her head was aching and she thought about texting her back to cancel. Then the urgency to do well on the test reminded her that she had to study. If she planned to go to medical school, she'd have to do well in biology.

She furrowed her brow unconsciously as she recalled one friend's reaction to her dream of becoming a doctor. The girl had looked at her and said, "Really? You're going to be a doctor?" as if she was attempting to do the impossible. Derisa had just nodded and said, "I'm going to be a doctor." Then she smiled and left the girl standing there. *I can be a doctor*, she thought. *Why can't I be a doctor?* The idea that people thought she couldn't do it made her more determined to prove them wrong.

Before she knew it, she was home. She opened the front door and walked in.

"Derisa, where've you been?" her mother called from the kitchen.

"I had to work, remember, Mum?" Derisa tried to keep her voice calm. "I told you this morning. Didn't you listen?"

"You need to put your roster up on the fridge, like we've asked you," Mrs Moore reminded her irritably, responding to the tone of Derisa's question.

Derisa left the kitchen in a bad mood. She slipped up the stairs and had a quick shower, then she sat down on her bed, picked up her phone and started to scroll mindlessly. *I'm so tired. I just want to sleep*, she thought. But her mind tuned back in when she saw a video from Lauren on the feed she was looking at. It showed three cups of coffee being clinked together, with a popular local cafe tagged. Derisa smiled.

Looks like someone had a good time, she messaged Lauren privately.

Lauren started to reply instantly. Derisa laid back on her pillow and let her best friend fill her in on all the details. Derisa let her chatter, adding a few reactions here and there to let Lauren know she was listening. Then Derisa heard a knock on her door.

Megan's here to study, she texted Lauren. Talk to you later.

"Come in!" she called from her spot on the bed.

"It's me." Megan cautiously poked her head into the room, her blond curls falling around her face.

Derisa gave her a smile, and motioned her to sit down. They laughed and talked as they pulled out their biology books and sorted through their notes. Then they settled down to study.

A couple of hours later, after Megan had left, Derisa was sure her brain contained all the knowledge it could hold that night. She climbed into bed and turned out the light. She hardly had time to do her usual review of the day's events because she was asleep almost as soon as her head hit the pillow.

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The next morning Derisa decided to use her free period to study biology. She had settled into a study booth in the library when she heard voices coming towards her. She ducked her head so they wouldn't see her, but it was too late.

"Derisa!" It was Daniel's voice.

"What's up?" She immediately recognised Rick's voice.

"Hey guys." Derisa gave them her best annoyed look, but the laughter in her eyes gave away her upset image. They quickly pulled up chairs and got comfortable.

"Guess I won't get much studying done with you guys here, will I?" She attempted to keep the serious tone in her voice, but it gave way and she started laughing. The guys started telling her stories that made her laugh, and playfully bugged her about studying so hard. Before she knew it, the bell rang and she had to head off to her next class. Rick disappeared, but Daniel followed her.

"So, do you have a big date for the banquet?" His question caught her off guard.

"No, why?" Derisa's stomach started to tighten as she anticipated where this was headed.

"Well . . . I was wondering if you'd go with me?" He gave her a smile, as if to cover his nervousness. He looked intently at her, waiting for her answer.

"Um . . . I don't know." She struggled for the right words. Daniel and Rick were fun to hang out with but she wasn't interested in *going out* with Daniel. *But how can I tell him that?* she thought.

"Sure, Daniel, I'll go with you," she said.

"You will? Oh, that's so great!" His excitement was evident.

Derisa gave him the best smile she could muster. Suddenly he couldn't seem to find anything to say, which seemed strange considering his usual ease with the ladies. She couldn't help but grin at the awkwardness of the moment.

"I'd better hurry—I'm going to be late for class." He almost seemed relieved when she excused herself and headed down the hallway.

She quietly slipped into a desk and pulled out her books. *How could I say yes?* she thought. *What was I thinking? This is not what I need right now—a date that I don't want to go on.* The teacher began class and momentarily interrupted her thoughts. *It will be OK. I can do this. It's only a banquet.* The more she reasoned with herself, the better she felt. *This really isn't a big deal.*

Before she knew it, class was over and the knot in her stomach was loosening. She headed straight for Lauren's locker.

Derisa leaned against the locker adjoining Lauren's and attempted her best puppy-dog eyes.

Lauren laughed at her friend's expression. "What's wrong?"

"Daniel asked me to the banquet," Derisa said in a monotone voice.

"So? That's a good thing, isn't it?" Lauren raised her eyebrows.

"I guess? I mean, I don't want to give him the wrong idea." Derisa ran her fingers through her long brown hair. "It won't be so bad, will it? I wanted to say no, but I didn't know how to. I didn't want to hurt his feelings."

"You're a good person, Derisa," Lauren said. "You'll be fine. Don't worry. You're not making any serious commitments here."

Derisa nodded. "I guess so."

Lauren pulled her towards their next class. *What would I do without Lauren to reassure me? I think I'd go crazy.* Lauren had already launched into some crazy escapade that had happened in food lab soon after they had first met.

"Remember when we were making sponge cake, and we kept mixing it too much? We must have used two dozen eggs . . . we had to keep starting over." Lauren always exaggerated her stories and, as Derisa recalled the memory, she couldn't help laughing along. She and Lauren always had a great time together, even doing the most ordinary things.

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After school, Derisa and Lauren went to talk with Mrs Brown to finalise plans for the banquet. They debated, discussed and planned for the big event.

"Since I am your vice-president, I vote brownies for dessert." Lauren sounded confident that she would win this one. "Everyone loves brownies."

"Brownies? Why not! We can get those pretty cheap." Derisa was tired of making all these decisions. "Mrs Brown, will that be OK?"

"Yeah, that will be fine." Mrs Brown gave the girls an amused look. "Relax, girls. Everything will work out." The decision-making continued, eventually switching from food choices to finalising details of the entertainment and then to decorations.

"We looked for the candles that you mentioned and we couldn't find them," Derisa explained. "Where else should we look?"

"Did you check Party Land?" Mrs Brown asked. "I think they should have them. Tell them it's a school function and you might get a discount."

"Discounts are good," Derisa laughed. "OK, we'll check it out tomorrow morning and pick up the rest of the supplies."

The small group split up, going separate ways. "I'll call you tonight!" Lauren called across the parking lot. Derisa waved, got into her car and headed to work.

Later that night, while she reviewed her biology notes, her phone lit up. Derisa leaned over the side of her bed to look at it. Lauren was calling.

"Hey, Lauren." She moved the phone so she could get comfortable again.

"You'll never guess who called me!" Lauren sounded shocked.

"I don't know . . . Rick?" Derisa guessed.

"No, I wish it was Rick." Lauren didn't wait for Derisa to guess again. "It was Ethan. He asked me to the banquet."

"So, what did you say?" Ethan wasn't a close friend of theirs and they hardly even spoke to him. "You said yes, didn't you?" She started to laugh, recalling their similar conversation earlier in the day.

"Yes." Lauren gave a dramatic sigh. "I didn't know how to tell him no either."

"We both get to have dates we don't want," Derisa concluded, "and pull off our first big social event of the year. This will be fun."

"I'm glad you think so," Lauren laughed. "At least we're in it together." Derisa leaned back on her pillow and listened to Lauren chatter, but her thoughts were elsewhere. *I don't know if I can make it through this banquet. There's just so much to get done before tomorrow night.*

Derisa and Lauren skipped their first two classes to go and buy the rest of the supplies.

"I think we've got everything," Lauren stated proudly.

"I hope we didn't forget anything." Mentally, Derisa continued to run down the list of things they needed. "We bought the plates, didn't we?"

"Yes, we've got everything." Lauren grinned at her. "I wonder what people think, with our car full of helium balloons!"

"And we still have more to pick up." Derisa joined her laughter, watching Lauren fight with the balloons so they'd stay in the back seat.

"Look at the time! We're going to miss our biology test!" Derisa pulled into the school parking lot and began unloading the balloons.

Together they struggled to get the balloons into the gymnasium where the banquet would be held that night. They left the balloons in a safe place, gathered their books and arrived just before class began. As the teacher started handing out the tests, Derisa's stomach became a knot, her back ached and she couldn't find a comfortable sitting position. When she tried to remember her notes, her mind went blank. *I can't do this. I'm going to fail*, she thought. The teacher handed her a test. She started to skim the pages. *I guess it doesn't look so bad.* Taking a deep breath, she began to answer the first question.

"Wasn't that test awful?" Lauren complained later. "I probably failed."

"I don't think you failed," Derisa sympathised. "I'm sure you did fine."

"There you guys are!" Megan announced. "I was wondering if you needed any help setting up for the banquet."

Each class elected a member to help with social events but so far Derisa and Lauren seemed to be doing all the work.

"I've sent a message to the social committee group chat," Derisa said. "We're meeting in the gym to decide what each person needs to do. But I'm not sure how many people will come along. It would be great to have some extra help, thanks, if you're free."

Megan nodded. "I'll come along. I'll ask Sarah too." Sarah was another one of their friends, an athletic girl with red hair.

A few minutes later, Derisa stood up in front of the small group gathered in the gym. Derisa was feeling nervous. Her heart was beating faster than usual and she could feel sweat trickling down her back. *We've got three hours and 10 people to pull this thing off. I don't know if it's possible.*

"Thank you guys for coming," she began slowly, until she knew she had their full attention. "We have a lot to get done. I want everyone to stick around until everything is finished." She then began to assign tasks to certain people. "We've got to work really hard, guys." Derisa wanted to instil a sense of urgency. "Three hours until show time—let's do it!" The group split up, each heading to an assignment.

Derisa left the gym to make sure the food preparations were underway. Satisfied with progress there, she headed back to the gym. She saw people taking their time, working half-heartedly.

"Come on, guys, let's work together!" Derisa hurried over to the group that was hanging streamers, pulled out a chair and began helping.

"Where are the microphones?" the guy in charge of sound was calling from the stage. "I can't find them anywhere." Derisa climbed onto the stage and explained where to find them and how she wanted them set up. Just then, one of the bands showed up. Derisa expertly took charge of the situation, explaining how things needed to be arranged.

"Hey Derisa, is this where you want the tables?" one of the guys yelled. "And how many do we need?"

Derisa hurried over to the crew and explained where she wanted the tables. She continued going from group to group, helping where she

could and making sure things were getting done.

Then she sat down with a group of girls who were blowing up balloons and started helping them. *We've got an hour and a half until show time*, she thought. *What if this whole thing turns out really bad and no-one has fun? It's not looking as good as I'd hoped.* Her mind wandered and she began to doubt that she could pull this off. Suddenly, she wondered where Lauren was.

"I'll be right back," she announced as she left the group and headed down the hallway. She spotted Lauren talking to a group of guys, and immediately recognised Rick's voice.

"Lauren!" Derisa sounded upset. "I need you in there. We've got so much to do. I can't do this by myself, you know!"

"I'm sorry." Lauren looked at Derisa's red face. "I've got to go, guys." She turned quickly and left the group.

"How could you leave me in there, doing everything by myself?" Derisa's hurt and frustration were evident. "We're a team. There's just too much to do by myself."

"I was helping you. I was just taking a break," Lauren argued, sounding hurt herself. "Maybe you should too. You're so uptight and stressed. It's going to be OK."

"Not if we don't get everything done in time. I need your help." Derisa felt completely drained. *Why am I the only one who's concerned?* she wondered. *Everyone seems to have all the time in the world.*

"Sure," Lauren said and started walking away. But Derisa could hear the hurt and anger in Lauren's voice.

"Wait." Derisa caught up to Lauren. A lump was forming in her throat. "I shouldn't have gotten so upset. I'm really sorry, Lauren." Tears clouded her eyes and she blinked furiously to stop them from falling.

"It's OK." Lauren took her hand and squeezed it. "I should have been helping you and not hanging out with the guys. I'm really sorry." Derisa gave her a hug.

Together they headed back into the gym as Derisa explained the jobs that needed to be finished.

Pretty soon the gym was looking like a banquet hall. The tables were set beautifully and only Derisa and Lauren noticed the slightly uneven table cloths. Balloons were everywhere and the dim lighting was almost

perfect. They just needed to light the candles. At last, it will nearly show time. Now they just needed to get ready themselves.

"Let's go put our dresses on." Lauren tugged on Derisa's arm. "Everything looks great."

"Yeah." Derisa stared absently at the room that three hours earlier had been an ordinary gym. She let herself be led down the hallway to the washroom where their dresses were hanging. As they got dressed Lauren talked about Rick and what his band was going to play.

"But you're going with Ethan," Derisa reminded her. "Don't forget that."

"I know, but that doesn't mean that Rick can't see me looking nice," Lauren smiled flirtatiously as she finished doing her hair.

"You're crazy," Derisa laughed. "Don't leave me though, we've got to stick it out with our dates."

When the girls returned to the gym, a few couples had arrived and were mingling in the far corner. They seemed oblivious to the nicely decorated surroundings. Couples kept coming in and Derisa and Lauren kept checking on the food. They wanted everything to run smoothly.

After it appeared that everyone had arrived and was seated, Derisa walked to the front and onto the stage. Her wine-coloured dress fit her slim figure perfectly. Her hair fell just below her shoulders and shone under the spotlight. Stepping up to the microphone, she gave her most beautiful smile, her blue eyes sparkling.

"Good evening." Derisa paused momentarily, letting the auditorium quieten down. "I want to welcome you to the banquet—our first event of the year." She scanned the audience. Her heart jumped when she spotted Tyler and his date. She made some announcements but her eyes kept going back to his. "I hope you have a wonderful time. Thank you all for coming," she concluded.

Applause broke out, and she smiled again. Suddenly she felt her confidence return. Giving a playful bow, she stretched out her arm and motioned to the side doors where the student association reps appeared, dressed in black and white, and carrying food on platters. She stood there a moment longer, then gracefully descended the stairs, where Lauren joined her.

"The guys have saved us seats," Lauren whispered. "Right over there." She discreetly motioned with her eyes.

"OK," Derisa whispered. "I guess we should head over. Things seem to be going well. We'll check again later."

Lauren slipped her arm through Derisa's and led her to their table. Daniel and Ethan both smiled and stood up when they saw the girls approaching.

"Don't you look charming!" Daniel spoke playfully, then continued more seriously. "You really do look beautiful."

"Thank you." Derisa gracefully accepted the compliment and took her seat beside him. She looked over at Ethan and felt so bad for him. He struggled awkwardly for something to say, and Lauren tried to get him to relax by chattering about her day. He seemed relieved that he didn't need to say much.

When the meal was almost over, the girls excused themselves for a few minutes. They went to the kitchen to see that everything was OK. Derisa hurried backstage to make sure the bands were ready to perform. Soon the girls were seated at their table again.

Derisa kept watching the clock. At exactly 6.30, she slipped away from her table and went backstage.

"OK, you guys ready?" She eyed them all carefully, then smiled when they nodded. "Good. You're on in five." Then, pulling aside the curtain, she stepped into the waiting spotlight. She blinked at the sudden brightness.

"Give it up for Derisa!" a guy yelled from the audience. Applause broke out, and people cheered and whistled.

"Thank you." Derisa smiled and nodded, stepping up to the microphone. "Thank you very much." She motioned for them to stop clapping. "I would also like you to thank my whole team for their work on preparations. Without them, this banquet would not have been possible." Clapping resumed for a few moments.

"But the evening has just begun." Derisa addressed her student body with a poise that covered any nervousness she felt. "We have several musical groups that are going to share their talents with us." She paused and looked into the audience. Her gaze fell on Tyler, whose eyes were fixed intently on her. Derisa swallowed hard. Tyler smiled and nodded encouragingly. She looked up and continued, with more energy in her voice. "Please welcome our first band of the evening, led by Mark Jones!" She stepped aside as the curtain parted and the band began to play.

Then she slipped unnoticed down the stairs and back to her table. Suddenly, she felt the urge to cry and tears threatened to fall. Derisa blinked fiercely to stop them. *Why do I feel like crying? Everything's going well.* She pushed her chair back and quickly left the table. Lauren was focused on the band, particularly Rick, and Daniel didn't question her leaving.

She pushed open the door and stepped into the quiet hallway, then walked quickly in no particular direction. She fought the tears and tried to breathe deeply.

"Derisa?" It was the principal, Mr James. "Are you alright?" Derisa nodded.

"You're doing a wonderful job." When he touched her shoulder, the tears started to fall. *Why am I crying? Things have gone OK. And it's finally almost over.*

"It's just that . . ." she struggled to speak. "There's just so much going on. I've worked for hours, and . . ." The sobs shook her shoulders, ". . . and I feel I've pushed everybody too hard."

"No-one would have known. Everyone's having a good time, including your team." Mr James gave her a reassuring smile. "I mean it. You've done a good job."

"Thanks." Her sobs were subsiding, and she wiped the tears from her cheeks.

"You have to be careful that you don't take on too many things," Mr James said gently. "You're very talented, but one person can handle only so much. Even if they're good things, stress can add up."

"I know," Derisa nodded. "But everything has been on my shoulders. If it didn't work out, it would have been my fault." Her frustrations started to come through. "I couldn't trust anyone to get anything done without me reminding them—or helping them." Then she quietly added, "If I want anything done right, I feel like I've got to do it myself."

Mr James nodded with understanding. "Leaders often face that challenge. But as you rely on your team and encourage them, they will learn to take more responsibility. Let people help you out—even if it doesn't turn out quite as perfectly as you hoped. You can't do everything yourself." He paused for a moment. Her tears had nearly stopped. "Before you go back in, take a few minutes to relax. Take a few deep breaths and

visualise yourself somewhere else. For a few minutes, pretend that you don't have all the responsibility on your shoulders." Mr James spoke from experience, and she could tell. "Then you can go back to reality a little more refreshed." He looked at Derisa to see if it was all making sense. It seemed to be, so he added, "Promise me that you'll try to relax, even in the midst of all this chaos. OK?"

"OK, I'll try," was all Derisa could muster as she continued to wipe her cheeks.

Mr James looked at her seriously. "You're doing well. Even if they don't tell you, the students really do appreciate your hard work."

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After they finished talking, Derisa hurried to the bathroom and touched up her makeup. She didn't want anyone to know she'd been crying. While she was there, she leaned against the cool wall and took a few deep breaths. It really did help. She stepped back into the gym feeling more composed just as the first band was finishing. She gently lifted the skirt of her dress just enough to go up the stairs and onto the stage. Smiling, she approached the microphone.

"Next, please welcome Kevin O'Donnell's band!" She could hear shuffling behind the curtain, instruments being moved and voices whispering. She gave an exasperated sigh and smiled. "I think they're ready . . . Kevin O'Donnell's band!" she repeated and dramatically waved her right arm behind her as the curtain opened, then she joined the applause. She slipped down the stairs and walked towards her table, where Lauren was running towards her. In a few seconds, Lauren had engulfed Derisa in a hug.

"You're doing a great job," she whispered. "We did good."

Derisa couldn't help smiling, and she hugged her best friend tightly. "Yeah, we did good," she said. "And soon it will be all over and we can go home." Together they walked back to their table to join their dates.

Sitting at her table, she looked around the room, seeing mostly familiar faces. They seemed to be having a good time. She looked over at Daniel who was listening intently to the band. *I guess he isn't too bad of a date*, she thought. She looked over at Ethan and again felt bad for him. *Poor guy, he's so shy. I'm surprised he even asked her.* Lauren seemed distracted

as she watched the band play. *Probably daydreaming about Rick*, Derisa thought, swallowing a smile. As she continued to scan the crowd, her eyes spotted the back of Tyler's head. Her stomach tightened and she eyed his date. *I wonder if he really likes her. Oh, it doesn't matter. I can't let myself think about him.*

"Derisa!" Lauren coaxed her back to reality. "The band is doing their last song. You should get ready to go back up there."

"Yeah, I knew that," Derisa grinned. "I'm sorry, I wasn't here for a moment."

"I noticed that," Lauren said, playfully hurrying Derisa. "You better run."

Derisa walked towards the stage, waiting for the band to finish. When the curtain began to close, she carefully ascended the steps. The applause continued for several minutes. She began to wrap up the evening.

"I hope each of you had a wonderful evening." Derisa spoke quietly as the noise died down. "Thank you for coming tonight. I appreciate your support and hope you'll join us in the upcoming events. Have a fabulous night everyone!" Her voice rose slightly and she smiled. Everyone clapped as she left the stage.

Everyone began to leave. Derisa and Lauren quickly said goodbye to their dates, then gathered their small group to start cleaning up. Most of the balloons had been taken and some streamers had started to fall.

The committee gathered round looking tired but pleased. "Good work, Derisa. That went really well," one of them said, and others echoed the praise. Derisa was getting ready to thank them all for their work when she noticed one of the younger student reps looking at his phone and seeming upset.

"What's wrong?" Derisa asked him.

He looked like he regretted that she had noticed him. He sighed, knowing she would find out eventually. "A few trolls making negative comments."

Derisa came and looked over his shoulder, and the others started pulling out their phones to look. People had been posting photos from the banquet but the comments on some of the photos were awful. She scrolled down the posts, then wished she hadn't. There were comments making fun of the decorations and criticising the food. Then she saw a

photo of herself on the stage. Someone had made an indecent comment about how she looked in her dress. She felt sick and violated.

"They had no right to say those things." Derisa turned and saw Tyler standing nearby holding his phone. He had obviously seen the comments too.

"This is their usual style," Sarah said, with a disgusted look on her face. Derisa looked at her in surprise. She hadn't noticed people at school making comments like this on social media before.

"I know you guys are busy cleaning up," Tyler said. "So I'll go and let Mr James know about this. Some of these have crossed the line."

Derisa looked at him, surprised. "Thank you," she said, simply. She suddenly wanted nothing more than to be home in bed.

An hour later, not much was left of the decorations. Derisa's back ached and her head had started to pound, but she had to keep going and make sure everything was cleaned up.

At home, she opened the front door and walked in, then laid her book bag down and headed to the kitchen to get a glass of water.

"How did the banquet go?" her mum asked.

"Fine," Derisa answered softly.

"Everything went well?"

"Yes, Mum. It was fine." Derisa didn't feel like talking about it. "I'm going up to bed. I'm really tired."

"OK, honey." Her mum touched her arm. "Sweet dreams."

Derisa turned and left the kitchen without saying anything. She walked up to her room, went in and shut the door. The tears started to come. *Why am I crying? Most people had a good time. It went well.* She knew she shouldn't let the comments get to her. It was just a couple of people being hateful jerks. Their comments weren't true. But even though she knew it logically, she couldn't stop her tears. She went over to her bed and cried into her pillow, her body shaking with her sobs. *I'm sorry if the banquet wasn't good enough!* she mentally screamed at the guys who had dared to criticise. *You should try putting on a banquet!* she challenged them silently. She lay there and let herself cry. *I'm sorry if it wasn't good enough.*

She cried until she was simply out of tears, then finally got ready for bed. Lying in the darkness, sleep seemed to elude her, giving her far too

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