

“Answer me, you slut!” “Whore!” “Hey, baby, you want some of this?”

Don’t answer. Keep your head down. Don’t speak. “Whoa there, little lady. Why don’t you just come here with me?” **Don’t speak!** But, he’s touching, he’s grabbing – No. You can’t speak. Those are the rules. If you speak, he wins. *They* win.

If only you had stayed home. But you couldn’t. The test. Who holds a test on Valentine’s Day? No, that’s not the question. The question is who thought up this torturous “challenge” and why, oh why, did no one question it?

It is Monday morning again. You’re sitting in homeroom, minding your own business. The announcements are going on. Sports this, fundraiser that. Don’t forget how much of a loser you are if no one sends you a Valentine! And then, then, you hear it. The news you never wanted to hear.

“We have a challenge for all you girls! This Friday you are to keep your hearts. Friday, each girl will be given a heart necklace. With this, you are not allowed to talk the entire day, unless to a teacher. Any boy that catches you talking will take your heart. The boy with the most hearts at the end of the day will receive a prize! Good luck, girls!”

Now you’re bound to it. Bound like all the others. “Say something!” a small voice inside of you says, but you can’t. It’s tradition. No one wants to hear words like “sexist” or “inappropriate.”

No, you know exactly what would happen if you said something. “That’s not really sexist. It’s one day a year, jeesh.” “It’s all in good fun.” “Stop overreacting. I’m a girl and I don’t think there’s anything wrong with it!” So you do what any good little girl would do and keep your trap shut. You’ll receive your necklace like all the others, but you’ll keep it safe. No one will take your heart from you.

Friday afternoon and you still have your heart, but at what cost? The day is almost over, sure, but the boys with the most necklaces have become relentless in their pursuit.

Insulting. Grabbing. Doing anything in their power to take it from you. But you, too, are relentless. Keep your head down. Don't speak. Don't utter a blessed word.

And then, like a Knight in Shining Armor, he's there. Shooing them off. Threatening *them*. He doesn't have any hearts around his neck. After the other boys have scampered off like the rats they are, he leans down and asks gently, "Are you okay?"

You nod. For the first time since the day began you feel as if you can relax. You're safe. Head up. Look proud. You've won. No boy will have the satisfaction of stealing your heart. Not today.

And then your world crumbles in an instant. He reaches down to cup your face, anticipating – you suppose – *his* prize. You try to struggle, but his grip is firm. There's no way out. No way to make him stop. No. *No!* "No!" you scream.

He lets you go, a satisfied smile crossing his face. "Your necklace," he says, holding his hand out expectantly.

Tears well up in your eyes as you hand it over. They had won after all. Keep your head down. Don't speak. Don't say a blessed word.