

Leave it On the Track by Margot Fisher

Fuck: 53

Shit: 25

Damn: 4

Hell: 6

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on the table to bathe the mezzanine in a warm glow. Mercury sits cross-legged on the Persian rug and opens her can of wine. She drinks probably too much of it, too fast.

I open the can Mercury offers me and take a sip because it seems like the right thing to do. The wine is bitter on my tongue, but it also feels heady, light, like kissing Mercury. I follow her lead and take a longer drink. When I lower it, Mercury's watching me, her dark eyes reflecting the candlelight. She's looked at me like this before—on the ridge and in practice and in Carmen's attic and in my bedroom and every single time I see her.

I lean over toward her, and I love kissing her here, in the darkness of the Hangar, a little buzzed from stolen wine and in a cavernous space we're definitely not supposed to be in.

"Captaining the Hot Shots isn't everything," she says. "I don't think I realized it until that night we had to pick up my brothers, when you told me that I didn't have to take care of everybody."

"What about the team?" I ask quietly. Her face glows in the candlelight, a halo around her hair with the vast darkness of the Hangar around us.

"I'm tired of worrying about the team."

Mercury kisses me. I reach up to touch her face, and her hand finds my hip, sliding up my waist. When she touches my bare skin, creeping under my shirt, something deep within me flutters. Then there's only Mercury, and I'm breathing her, lost in her, floating from the bubbly wine and the candlelight and the thrill of being somewhere we're not supposed to be, doing something we're not supposed to do.

I'm dizzy as Mercury leans into me, her hand tangled in my hair. Cautiously, her tongue parts my lips, and then everything is sharp breaths and teeth and lips.

When we've kissed for what feels like decades, we lie facing each other on the worn carpet, our legs tangled, the dark, open space of the Hangar yawning above us. For a while, neither of us speak—I just study every line and mole on her face, reach over to brush her dark hair away from her forehead. She takes my hand, threading her fingers through mine. The world pitches a little from the wine, but Mercury's face stays steady.



PRINTER PROPERTIES

OS Environment: Windows x64

PRINT DRIVER PROPERTIES

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Driver Name: HP Officejet Pro 8710 PCL-3
Driver Type:
Driver Version: 20.79.1.6692
Type 4 - User Mode
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ADDITIONAL PRINT DRIVER FILES

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The Poisons We Drink by Bethany Baptiste

*Presley is non-binary, using the pronoun “they” – fyi, to help in understanding the excerpts

Fuck: 99+ (Sora only identifies the first 99, so probably more...)

Shit: 33

Piss: 5

Bastard: 12

Damn: 56

Hell: 49

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CONTENT WARNING

Please beware that this book contains morally gray characters, complicated parent-child relationships, police brutality, fantasy violence, fantastical racism, magical coercion, gun violence, politics, parental death, child death, and dying/death. In addition, there are depictions of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression. Other content warnings include self-harm (such as needles for finger pricking and daggers for palm slitting to perform spells), blood and gore, sexual situations, real and fantasy drugs, underage drinking, and profanity.

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A white woman in her late thirties with a heart-shaped face and ash-blond curls emerged from the crowd. Venus winced slightly at the intense glint of her rainbow sequin dress and matching high heels.

The woman plopped into Nisha’s lap with a giggle. One ravenous kiss later, she pulled back with a happy sigh.

Nisha arched her dark eyebrow, amused. “Are you satisfied, my love?”

“Of course. Being here is much more fun than working double shifts at the hospital,” the woman said, swiping traces of her lipstick off Nisha’s lips. Then she swiveled her attention to Venus. “Outstanding work, brewer. Watching that fucker burn was the icing on the metaphorical cake. I’m Chelsea, by the way.”

Venus swallowed Presley's moan with a kiss. Fingernails bit meanly into her hips and guided her to go faster and harder, increasing her collection of fresh and hours-old nicks.

She broke the hungry kiss and pressed her forehead against theirs. Her eyes rolled back from bliss, her eyelids beating like butterfly wings.

A loud moan rippled in her throat.

Presley unleashed a sharp gasp, succumbing to another peak of euphoria.

Their bodies stilled, their hurried breaths tangling.

"I can't think straight for shit," they panted.

"That's the whole point," Venus remarked unevenly, a sprinkle of humor flavoring her delivery as she cascaded back to earth. She climbed off them and collapsed beside them, studying her orgasm's residuals as globs of color pigmented the air.

Presley slid off the bed to discard the spent protection in the waste bin by her vanity. Prismatic blobs awaited her when she closed her eyes, dancing and swirling for her entertainment.

The bed dipped, knees parted her legs, and hips separated her thighs. They trapped her against the mattress, their slick flesh and addictive warmth as her sky. Their mouth bestowed a soft, damp kiss on her neck's wild pulse, then suckled there as if to tame it to submission.

Venus pouted as their lips left her neck.

They reclaimed a spot at her side, exhaling.

Brown, slender fingers embraced hers, positioning the union in the morning light.

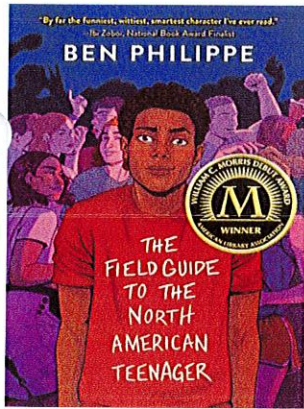
"I got you, Vee." A thumb stroked hers. "Always have, always will."

Their scarred palm pressed against hers. At the auroras party, Venus asked the story behind the scar, pouting a spoiled brat when they told her no.

Now, she realized that maybe Presley *couldn't* tell. Like hers, maybe a blood oath ensured they didn't. Maybe, that's why they returned after so long, convinced that *distance* would bring them *deliverance*.

Venus pushed the theories out of her mind to make room for a truth.

Being close to Presley Carter made her feel free.



The Field Guide to the North American Teenager

Fuck: 31
Shit: 23
Damn: 22
Hell: 33
Bitch: 21
Bastard: 1
Piss: 2
Dick: 11

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4

Loners

IDENTIFYING CHARACTERISTICS: Headphones that aren't necessarily playing anything. Sad eyes. Stand out just enough to let you know to stay away.

HABITAT: Basement-level lockers.

MATING HABITS: Weird porn. Like, German weird. Leeches and electro-rods. Stuff that gets your laptop blinking on a registry somewhere.

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"Well, I'm a beginner," Liam said, shifting his weight from one leg to the other. "A nonbeginner, really. Haven't begun yet, y'know."

Why was he fidgeting?

"I don't really know how to do it exactly, but I've seen plenty of videos online," Liam continued. "It doesn't specify beginners or, like, advanced, and I figure it can't be that hard, right?"

"Um . . ." Norris mustered. "I'm eighty percent sure you're talking about porn."

"Ice skating," Liam finally volunteered. "I've always wanted to learn. It just seems cool and—"

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Jim McElwees's eyes narrowed at Norris. He felt as if the man was taking inventory of every cell in his body through sight alone. Every secret, every incognito-mode porno browse, every nasty thought; the man could read all of it right then and there, Norris was sure of it.

"Fine," Jim eventually said with a short nod as he unexpectedly grabbed and shook Norris's hand.

"I'm, like, employed? Just like that?"

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8

House Party

ATTIRE: Black T-shirt, jeans, weekend Jordans.

GOALS: (1) A meaningful exchange with Aarti Puri, (2) not getting hurled down a flight of stairs.

SPECIAL ARTILLERY: Year-old condom from health class in wallet, because optimism plus preparedness is like teaming up Superman and Batman.

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9

High School Flirtations

OBSERVABLE CHARACTERISTICS: Fidgeting, awkward body language, strained laughter, giggling, neck-straining in an attempt to make eye contact.

COMMON PLACES OF OCCURRENCE: Hallway lockers, the cafeteria, sticky-floored basement of a keg party, empty classrooms, janitorial closets.

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"I was at the dinner table and my dad was just *drilling* me about chicks, and that I should hurry up and tap some ass because otherwise kids would start thinking I was a . . . y'know. I just got so sick of it. And you weren't there, and I just told him that his son is a 'one of them.'"

"Jesus fuck, dude, congrats! I guess. . . . Do you congratulate a coming out?"

"Gift certificates are preferred."

"Did he have a heart attack, your dad?"

Eric shrugged.

"There were a couple of rants," he admitted. "Seventeen-day silent treatment."

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There were mountains to be enjoyed. "Mom bought him a stack of books on how to cope with a gay child. Thin ones; big fonts. He definitely thinks I'm here having gay interracial winter sex with you, but he still drove me to the airport, so y'know, baby steps."

"The earring does look good." Norris grinned, earning him a shove back into a fresh snowbank on their way back to the condo.

"Shut the fuck up, Kaplan."

Norris didn't say it, but the outcome could have been far worse. Eric's dad was a raging ass. Whenever he gave Norris or other kids from the team a ride home, he was never short on nasty comments about new minority-owned stores or families. All Asians were Chinese to him and black was a communal noun. *Vous autres, les noirs* ("You blacks") was a common preface to many of the man's fascinating observations about the specific way black drivers misbehaved on the road or about P. K. Subban, the lone black hockey player on the Canadiens at one time. He also wasn't a fan of Quebecers who did not know

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@Eric53—What's wrong?

@Norrtorious—Why do you think something's wrong?

@Eric53—"Hey, how's it going?"

@Eric53—Bitch, plz.

@Norrtorious—M'fine. Just bored here.

@Eric53—I'm just going to keep saying Bitch, plz.

@Norrtorious—What are you up to tonight?

@Eric53—Date with M-A. He's picking me up and shit.

@Norrtorious—Chivalrous.

@Eric53—He made a point of telling me his parents are away. . . . Was that a code for sex? Am I about to have sex tonight?

@Norrtorious—_(ツ)_/

@Eric53—Do I want to have sex tonight?!

@Norrtorious—Lol, how am I supposed to answer that?

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"Just hand me your phone, all right?" She sighed. "Let's do this."

Norris didn't quite know why he'd agreed to this, but as they'd been working, Maddie had somehow made a pretty successful argument for giving her full access to his previous exchanges with Aarti, which meant his phone. After making sure his browsing history was clear of any recent embarrassing and/or pornographic searches (like most red-blooded teenagers, he had a healthy curiosity about these things),

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Somewhere between heartbeats, Norris leaned down and kissed Aarti. It was weirdly more nerve-racking and intimate than kissing her at the movie had been. Aarti's mouth tasted like tea with too much sugar in it, which was the only way tea tasted good anyway. The solid nineteen minutes of making out that followed were a very specific form of awesome. Norris's nerves soon faded away and something about the making out felt incredibly familiar, as though they had been doing this for years now and would for more to come.

Just then, the pool doors burst open, and Norris instinctively recoiled from Aarti.

"Aw," a gravelly voice echoed around the pool. "Young love, ain't that sweet?"

Mr. Goade, in a disturbingly tight and small swimsuit and flip-flops, sounded more amused than disapproving at the sight.

"What was the movie?"

"Um . . . *The Mighty Ducks*."

"Ah." Goade nodded approvingly. "Fine cinematic achievement. I know you're still relatively new, Norris, but you do know you are not allowed to be here at this hour, right?" he commented, taking in their setup.

"Um, neither are you," Aarti said, looking away and covering both eyes with her hand.

"Also, why are you naked?!" Norris blurted out, opting to cover the sight of Goade's body from the neck down with his hand. "Please address the nakedness!"

"I'm obviously not naked on school premises," Mr. Goade said calmly. Through his fingers, Norris could see the chemistry teacher place by the bleachers the small duffel bag he was carrying, alongside a frayed gray-green towel, which he was taking his time spreading out. A distant part of Norris admired his lack of body shame. "If you two would stop the theatrics, you'd see I'm working a bathing suit."

"No, that's a freaking Speedo, dude!" What the hell was wrong with this country?

"If it takes a V-shape like that, it's definitely a size too small, Mr. Goade," Aarti said, still looking away, stifling her laughter.

"Noted, Miss Puri," Goade said, actually stretching. "Although, unlike certain parties, I actually have a key to this building, granting me access after hours. Cheaper than a gym membership these days. And just what exactly might those bottles contain?"

"Canadian soda," Norris quickly lied. "Imported."

"Canadian soda," Goade casually repeated as he slowly stepped out of his flip-flops and lowered a very retro-looking pair of swim goggles from the top of his head. "Tell you what? I'm going to jump into this pool and take exactly five laps, as recommended by my asshole of a cardiologist. Afterward, I will be tempted to take a sip of this Canadian soda. Unless you two lovebirds find a way out of here before I'm done."

Norris and Aarti exchanged quick looks. There was definitely no making out left to be had at this swimming pool.

"Say no more. We were just heading out. Right, Aarti?"

"Yes, right. Lap away, Mr. Goade," Aarti quickly added, already grabbing the nearest beer. "We'll be out of your hair in a second."

They left the projector on a bench outside the AV club for someone else to deal with, and it wasn't until they were safely at Aarti's car that they permitted themselves to laugh, doubled over against the passenger-side door.

"So how does a half-naked chemistry teacher rank, date-wise?" he asked.

The ten additional minutes of car-leaning makeout and giggles that followed were answer enough for Norris.

Pg. 353

Shit.

Fuck.

Shitfuckcocknuggetasshole.

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The Dreaded Heart-to-Heart

POTENTIAL LIAM HOOPER REVELATIONS TO BRACE FOR:

"My parents are going through a divorce."

"I have a crippling porn addiction."

"I've been having an affair with Mrs. Kolb."

"I've been having an affair with Mr. Goade."

"So, you know squirrels? I kind of find them sexy.

Always have."

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Aarti seemed to sense his change in mood. "What are you thinking about?" she asked.

"Nothing, just . . . I think this is the first time I've, like, lounged on a girl's bed."

He probably shouldn't have said that.

"I probably shouldn't have said that."

"It's okay. You're sweet," she chuckled, moving closer. "Guys around here like to pretend they've been porn stars since age nine. It's exhausting."

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She smirked at him. The moment went on a little too long. They both became aware of how close they were; how horizontally positioned; on a bed. A very comfortable bed.

"Dude, I'm not going to have sex with you right now!" she laughed, causing Norris's head, ego, and the faintest hint of boner to all simultaneously pull back. "My parents are downstairs."

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29

The After-Prom Party

DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS: Complete lack of parental figures, wall-to-wall bodies thrashing, joints in bathrooms, sex in cars, party crashers, extensive property damage.

FOOD SOURCES: Kegs, coolers, ransacked liquor cabinets—nothing solid.

EXPECTATIONS FROM EVERY MOVIE EVER:

1. Secrets revealed, tempers flaring.
2. Fistfights. Someone is inevitably punched across the face. Please, God, let it be Ian.
3. Hissy fits. Someone is inevitably left publicly shamed. Please, God, let it be Meredith.
4. Strict dance laws are likely to be upheaved.

After Meredith's perfunctory coronation as prom queen for the second year in a row, Maddie, Meredith, Patrick, and a few others decided to check out an after-party currently taking place at a nearby golf club. Apparently, plenty of the kids who could not bother with the actual jock-y prom crowd (which Norris categorically did not see himself being a part of) were already there in jeans and shorts, getting properly trashed without adult supervision.

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dance floor, where Aarti and Ian were making out *hard*.

"Oh," Maddie said softly.

It was the sort of making out that needed the qualifier. Standard making out implied lips and tongues and nothing more. The current display involved esophaguses and pancreases (*has anyone ever used the plural of pancreas before?* he wondered distractedly). Ian and Aarti were making out *hard*, groping and pulling. Even people around the pair were taking unfavorable notice, and like them, all Norris could do was contemplate the sight. He felt restless, angry, and sad all at once. Nothing was rising; it was just a slow boil of emotions sitting hard and heavy in his belly.

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"Really, Aarti?" he asked, startling her out of the kiss. She looked back defiantly, shocked but entirely unapologetic.

"What are you doing here?"

"Dude," Ian said. "Fuck off! Every time we turn around, you're there. What the hell?"

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"It feels like I've missed a lot in a really short window," Felix eventually admitted. "Your first hangover, your first girlfriend . . . I had speeches prepared for all of these."

"You did?"

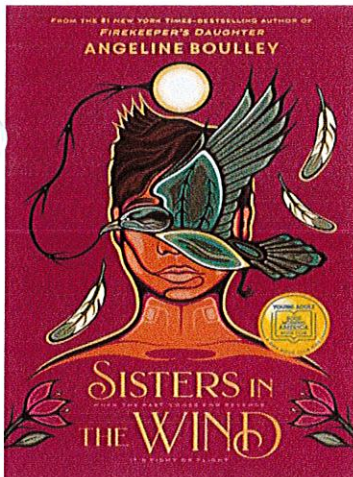
"Well, I have one ready for your first time. I can tell you all about that."

"God, Dad." Norris groaned. "Please don't."

"Nothing graphic. You're never going to be a porn star, so forget all that stuff your mother and I pretended you didn't browse when you got your own laptop. Just be in the moment, and pay attention to her needs, and—"

"I *will* scream," Norris warned. He swiped to a new photo to change the subject.

"Okay, okay. Who's that?" Felix asked. "Another girlfriend? Jesus, kiddo."



Sisters in the Wind by Angeline Boulley

Fuck: 6

Shit: 6

Damn: 5

Bitch: 9

Pg. 12

Content warning: This book contains depictions of child sex trafficking, child abuse, teen pregnancy, explosions and bombing, ableism, anti-Indigenous racism and colorism, hospitalization, gun violence, and death, with mentions of police brutality, genocide, and colonialism.

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She left powder-scented deodorant in the main-floor bathroom next to my bedroom, and gave another lecture that it was my responsibility to ensure I didn't perspire. Boys became sexually aroused by the odor of female sweat. The first day I forgot to use deodorant, Bridget sniffed in an exaggerated manner. I felt my nose tingle as the tears welled up.

Bridget purchased a box of extra-large sanitary napkins, warning that menstrual products would be needed any day now. Once I started menstruating, I requested tampons so I would not miss swimming days. She replied that pure young women didn't violate themselves by inserting foreign objects into their vaginas. Maybe, because I was growing up, my dad had invited her into our lives to give me an example of what a Catholic woman should be?

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I'd been with the Sterlings for a month before noticing the extra attention that Steven, the other Sterling sibling, paid to me. Or, rather, to my chest. Steven was a high school senior, and I guessed he was also what Devery would've called a "horndog."

I'd laughed when she'd first used the descriptor. She'd been so nonchalant about it. There were horndogs everywhere, according to Devery.

But the boys in high school who looked at my chest didn't stare the way Steven Sterling did. They were curious and furtive. They'd at least feign embarrassment if I caught them in the act. Steven glared at my breasts as if their fullness made him angry.

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When Diego leaned into me and kissed my lips, I felt strong and happy. I kissed him back. I wrapped my arms around him. He was warm. His T-shirt was threadbare and soft. My fingertips traced the muscles spanning his broad back.

I darted my tongue into his mouth, which tasted like fruity cough syrup and clove. He smelled of bonfire and, hidden beneath that, a faint musk of sweat long dried.

The groan that came from him was deep and rumbled from his chest into mine. I wanted to feel his skin against me and hear him groan again. We paused our kiss when I lifted his shirt over his head. His lips went to my neck and my earlobe. I tingled everywhere he kissed me, so I pulled my shirt up and off. Diego kissed my shoulders. He lingered at the inside of my wrist before tracing a vein all the way to my bicep. His breath was hot against my armpit before his tongue darted to lick there. The move surprised me—it was a body part I didn't think was sexy, but I felt a zing from my soft underarm to my groin.

I unclasped my bra, letting it fall to the ground, where our T-shirts made a tiny pile. My breasts reacted to the evening breeze, nipples puckering and goose bumps covering soft skin. I wanted his hot breath and warm hands on me. As soon as I guided his hands to my chest, Diego groaned again and nuzzled me.

We held each other, kissing and touching. I wasn't aware of us moving across the yard until we bumped against the picnic table in the hammock grove. I leaned against the edge of the table and helped Diego unbutton and unzip my jeans shorts. He slipped my underpants past my knees, trailing his lips down my legs. He kissed me in odd places—the underside of my knees, the softest part of my inner thigh, the bottoms of my feet.

He liked when I leaned him backward on the picnic table, as if he were the feast. I did the same thing he had done, kissing wherever I wanted.

It was the easiest thing to lie on top of him. We kissed and touched each other. I tingled all over and kept moving. For not knowing anything about intercourse beyond what I'd read in novels, I caught on quickly. I wanted to know where *he'd* learned how to set me alight. But that was for later.

He felt good. I felt good. We felt good together.

I gasped like coming up for air. I held on to Diego, kissing his neck and touching the small gold crucifix with my lips.

It felt right for Diego's God and the infinite universe of stars to be with us.

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"He does like his games," I said.

"I think he's a weird fucker," Boyd added.

"He's a good guy. Just an odd duck."

"Just an odd fuck," he said.

"Seriously?" I teased Boyd instead of calling him out as rude.

"Shoot, girl," he cooed, his drawl heavier. "You know I ain't about the *D*. I'm *P* all the way."

"*P* for 'penis'?"

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"You left out the most important detail," he drawled, "where you have sex on a picnic table. That's the key to everything."

I didn't like the way my skin went all clammy.

"W-w-why's that the key?"

"If you got pregnant, Diego would get the bonus. Not me."

My heart stopped. The world stopped.

"Bonus?" My voice was a mouse's squeak.

"Don't you know what this place is, Lucy?" He was thrilled to watch my reaction. "We're a baby farm. Girls like Emily and Paige come here already pregnant. Girls like Tonya get knocked up while they're here. Missus works with an adoption attorney. They find good homes for babies. Don't you know how many people want newborn babies? Especially white babies."

"Tonya is biracial," I pointed out.

"Yeah, but I made up for that." He was actually proud of himself.

"What sort of bonus did you get for Tonya's baby?" It took everything for me to not fall apart.

"That was a freebie. It had to be completely legal because it was for Allen and Jennifer," he said. "But I got five grand for Christina's baby."

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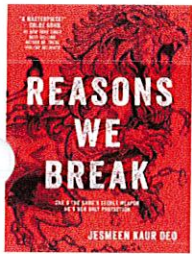
When I hugged Tonya, she squeezed hard enough to smush my chest. My breasts were a strange, disconnected part of my body. I'd developed early for my age and was on the receiving end of people's stares before I could learn that I hadn't done anything to cause their reactions. Steven Sterling had stared at my breasts, licking his lips and imagining me topless without any regard for me as a person. There were sleep positions that I couldn't manage. There was a constant ache from bra straps digging and rubbing raw grooves in my skin.

The morning after I'd had sex with Diego, I had felt sore. Tender in an unfamiliar way. Not just where he'd been inside me, but on my breasts from where his hands and mouth had touched and tasted. It had been a different sort of ache from what I felt each month before my period began. I hadn't known my breasts could tingle from the feeling of someone's lips on them. Or could feel bruised and delicate the next day.

Pg. 508

"No. I'm just stunned that you do Bruce's laundry—folding and putting it away."

She shrugged. "I'm just hanging out with you, farting around." She rolled her eyes. "Did you know he has a system for folding his clothes? He had to demonstrate. Even his underwear." She sighs. "But what the hell. He's great in bed, so I'm demonstrating my appreciation by not only folding his laundry but doing it precisely the way he likes."



Reasons We Break by Jesmeen Kaur Deo

Fuck: 91

Shit: 99+

Piss: 20

Dick: 9

Damn: 21

Hell: 35

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"Is flunking out of school *your* life's calling?"

She glares. "You're such an asshole." Rajan grins and turns to go, but her voice stops him. "You're off now, right? Wanna hang out?"

He turns back. He's got a meeting with Kat in, like, two hours, but... "Why?"

She sighs. "God, boys are so brainless. Do you wanna have sex or not?"

Subtlety's never been Chandani's strong suit. But he wanted to be sure. And, well, he has a feeling she needs a distraction just as much as he does.

He faces her fully. "You know, I went to juvie." Chandani says nothing. "For drug trafficking. Weapons possession. And...murder."

He waits for her alarm, for her to step away, to make excuses and leave. But Chandani's expression doesn't change. "So? I already knew all this."

He stares. "You...don't care?"

"Why would I? Let's go." Her nails sink into his hoodie like claws. His coworkers hoot in the background. "And *definitely* bring the hard hat."

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"The older I got, the more Jai asked me to do. He'd rent properties and insure cars in my name. He had me get my firearms license and buy guns, so his friends could break into my car and steal them. It made me nervous. But when I started pushing back, Jai said I owed him. That's when I saw a new side of him." She wraps her arms around herself. "The only control I had was when I cheated on him. But he didn't even seem to care. In fact..." She takes a deep breath. "He was more than okay with me having sex with other people. Last fall, he tried to talk me into doing it with his friend."

Simran stares. "Why?"

"For money. We'd split the profits, right? Except I knew it didn't work like that. I'd seen some of those girls...they weren't exactly on equal footing with their pimps." Zohra smiles grimly. "I finally said no to him."

"And?"

"He got mad." A shadow crosses her face. "I ran out of the house. Rajan was there. I got in the car, Jai was waving his gun around, screaming that he was going to kill me, and...I didn't think."

Simran realizes, suddenly, where the story is going. "It was you," she breathes. "*You* ran him over."

Zohra's eyes dart around, like someone might hear.

"Listen, I was *nineteen*. I was freaking out. Murder? I could go to prison. And even if not, all my law school dreams would be over. But...Rajan was seventeen."

Simran's still processing this. "He took the fall."

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But then there's another gunshot. And another.

Terror grips her. *It's happening*, a voice in her head whispers. *This is how the universe is balancing the end of one nightmare.*

With another.

As if to punctuate this, she suddenly hears *voices*.

Horribly close, and coming closer.

There are only two possibilities here: police or rival gang. Either way...she can't be here. She runs for the back door. It leads to a service hallway that has an exit. But as she reaches for the handle, it swings open on its own.

And there stands a tall man in a balaclava and hoodie, eyes glaringly blue and vicious. His gun is pointed right at her head.

A sound escapes Simran's throat. "*Please* don't." She puts her hands up. He descends upon her, and she backs up. Keeps going until she hits the wall.

He pins her against it. "Who the fuck are you?" His voice is gravelly.

Simran's frozen. It's like she's outside her body, watching this happen. *Think*, she begs herself. What answer does he want? *Think*.

The cold metal of the gun presses under her chin, making that impossible. "I'll ask one more time, bitch. Who are you?"

Her vocal cords feel like molasses. She cannot get her lips to form around any words.

Without warning, he raises his gun and hits her across the face. The metal is sharp and unforgiving, connecting against her glasses with a *crack*. They twist out of shape, digging into her nose, the lenses going lopsided.

She automatically reaches up to adjust them, but he grabs her wrist, then hits her across the face again. Her glasses skitter clean off. Her vision becomes a smear, the world losing definition, losing sense. "No—" she gasps, but he slams her against the wall again. A low chuckle.

"What, these?"

It's like watching through a windshield drenched in water, but she can see the blurry outline of his boot, stepping deliberately onto something on the floor. *Crunch*.

The sound snaps her out of her fear. He's had to shift his weight in order to destroy her glasses, so she shoves him as hard as she can. He stumbles—slightly. It's all she needs.

She barely makes it three steps before he yanks her back by the braid. Pain shoots through her skull, and she crashes down behind the table. Her chin collides with the chair back on her way down. Blood fills her mouth.

She hasn't even fully hit the floor before he's hauling her up by the back of her shirt. Then slamming her onto the desk. Papers scatter off. Her already bruised cheek smarts against the wood. All she can see is the blurry outline of a book and her pen beside it.

Disbelief steals over her. This cannot be the end. As her attacker wrenches her arms behind her back, absurdly, Simran thinks of her parents. She thinks of the police showing up at their door to say, *I'm sorry to have to tell you...*

Her mother would collapse. Her father...he would collapse in his own way. Inwardly. There would be nothing left for them. Nothing left of them.

An inhuman sound tears from Simran's throat. Some strength she didn't know she had possesses her, enough that she can wrench one arm free. She snatches the pen from the desk and twists, swinging it with all her might.

It sinks into something soft. Her attacker screams and releases her.

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"It's okay." His voice is gentle, and that makes her feel even worse. "Let me do that striptease I owe you so I can get out of here."

Simran busies herself clearing space on the bed. "Okay."
She pats the space next to her.

He remains standing. "I can do it here."

"I can't see you that far away."

He sighs again, like it's a big chore, and sits on the edge of her bed with her, drawing one leg up. "Can you see me now?"

She can't make out his expression. He seems to understand that, because he brings his face closer. "How about now?"

He's a touch closer than anyone should be. She's hyperaware of his fingers spread over her comforter, nearly touching her leg. But *now* she can see every flicker on his expression. The fullness of his lips. His long, thick eyelashes. The bob of his throat as he swallows. The tiny cut on the underside of his jaw where he must've nicked himself shaving. The bruise forming on his cheekbone, despite his insistence that he didn't get injured at all. Those expressive eyes, nearly haunted tonight.

Despite everything, she feels completely at ease. She's seen every piece of him now. And she cannot help but adore the picture they create.

She looks at him straight on. "Yes," she says. "I do see you."

His breath catches. And then—then—he kisses her.

Simran freezes. His mouth is soft against hers. It reverberates down her entire body, all the way to her toes. She has no room for anything but shock—shock, and giddiness—before he abruptly pulls away.

Completely. His arms are gone. Her mattress shifts as his weight leaves, too. She's left gaping and frozen and missing his heat and he's—he's on his feet, pacing her bedroom, or at least the little of it with open floor.

He curses. Loudly. His next words are harsh and cutting. "Tell me to leave."

"Wh-what?" She touches her lips with trembling fingers. *He kissed her. Rajan kissed her.*

He runs his hands down his face and turns to face the wall. "Shit," he mutters. "Shit, shit, shit. What the *fuck* is wrong with me—the *one thing* I swore I'd never do—"

He seems to be talking to himself. Simran clutches the fabric of her comforter on either side of her. She can't draw enough breath to reply, anyway.

He finally turns her way again. "Don't look at me like that. This is the most fucked-up thing I've ever done to you. Tell me to get out."

He sounds desperate, gutted, furious. Her mouth opens and closes several times.

He doesn't appear able to wait. "Fine." He wheels away. "Don't say anything. I'm leaving."

He reaches for the doorknob. Simran stands before he can turn it.

"Rajan."

It's funny, because right until then, she would've thought nothing could make him hesitate. But his whole body stills. She has power over him, she realizes. The thought makes her heady. *He kissed her*. That means something, doesn't it? Even if it was just for a moment, he wanted to do it. He wanted...*her*.

"Come here." She doesn't recognize her own voice.

Rajan lets go of the doorknob like it burned him. He turns back around. A thick silence falls. He doesn't come to her...but he's not leaving, either.

Some part of Simran reminds her this is reckless—so reckless. But she doesn't want to think about that. Just this once, she doesn't want to think at all. She wants to *feel*.

He's still not moving, so she comes to him. She puts her hands on his chest, fascinated with how unsteadily it rises and falls. She looks at his face. The hunger in his eyes thrills her.

"I still don't know how to kiss," she whispers, the confession unembarrassed. He's never made her feel ashamed for these things.

Slowly, Rajan slides his hand over the side of her neck.

"Then let me teach *you* something for a change."

He leans down to her. It's a closed-mouth, simple kiss. Long enough for her to get comfortable with the press of his lips. When her hands fist the material of his hoodie, he lifts away and then comes back, head tilted the other way, his mouth coaxing hers with gentle brushes, nibbles. *Like this*, he seems to be saying, before returning from a different angle. *And this*.

A part of her she didn't know existed rises up to this challenge, matching him in counterpoint and pace. *Like this, and this, and this*. Mouths together and then apart, together and apart. Together, for longer this time. Much longer...His fingers sink into her hair. She wraps her arms around his neck, on her tiptoes, him bending her back slightly to accommodate their height difference. His tongue brushes hers. Heat sweeps through her, and she seeks it again, wanting to learn this part, too. And, *oh*, this is something different.

Her lungs burn, but he doesn't seem to have the same oxygen demands as her, he keeps kissing her and kissing her

and *kissing her*, and eventually she has to turn her head away and gasp for air. It's a good thing he's holding her up because she's not certain she could stand otherwise.

Worry overtakes her then. Is he enjoying this as much as she is? She clutches his arms. "Am—am I doing this right?"

Rajan goes still, and for a second she fears the worst. Then he grabs the backs of her thighs and hoists her up. She squeaks as he raises her just above his eye level.

"Sahiba." His eyes are bottomless. "If *that's* what you're thinking about, *I'm* the one who's not doing it right."

And then he throws her onto the bed.

Well—he doesn't *throw* her, exactly, but it happens rather fast. He carries her over in two long strides, and then the mattress bounces as her back hits it, her hair fanning around her. She doesn't have time to process how he does it so smoothly because then he's crawling over her, her mattress bowing to accommodate the additional weight.

From above, his mouth descends on her again. His kisses take on a frantic edge, like he's on the clock. Like at any moment a bell might sound, a clanging *Wrong! Wrong! Wrong!* that makes him desperate to wring as much out of her as he can in the time they have. And it's infectious.

She wants more. He's not being daring enough for her liking—one hand cradling her jaw, the other on the pillow beside her head. Keenly aware of this unknown, terrifying clock counting down on them, she voices her urgency in the

least intelligible way possible. "Touch me," she gasps between kisses. "Touch me touch me touch me—"

He pulls away to ask, "Where?"

"Anywhere," she replies, and marvels at how safe she feels saying that to him. "Anywhere you want."

However, Rajan's eyes flutter shut as if in pain. "*Simran.*"

Her own name sweeps over her skin. Not *Sahiba*. Not *Auntie*. Certainly not *dude*. Just...*Sim-ruhn*, the syllables of her gently pried apart so he could place a kiss between them. She wonders if this is why he's never said her name by itself before. If it was always going to sound like this.

"Tell me if it's too much," he says roughly, and *then* he touches her. And she feels like she's jumped from the pot into the fire. Because she was right—his unleashed hands do absolutely scandalous things under her shirt, over her body, each touch warm and wanting and teasing and *taking*. He touches her with the certainty of someone who studied her map and plotted his route years ago. He's not exploring; he's *confirming*. And she. Could. Drown in it.

"Say my name again," she pleads, clutching the back of his neck and staring at the ceiling, feeling completely delirious. She'll probably be embarrassed with the things she's demanding of him later, but she doesn't care.

He obliges her. "Simran." He noses the collar of her shirt away to press his lips to her bare shoulder. "Simran. Simran. *Simran*."

Each utterance of her name is another kiss. Each one feels like another barrier between them that they're recklessly destroying, that can never be rebuilt. When his teeth tug down her bra strap, an involuntary noise escapes her. It's breathy and sort of embarrassing. But he stills.

"You're not playing fair, making sounds like that." His voice is ragged. "You know that shit's never gonna leave my brain."

In response, she tugs at his hoodie. "Take this *off*."

He shucks his hoodie off easy, without comment, the white undershirt beneath momentarily rucking up with it. She can only admire how he makes even *this* thoughtless motion incredibly rewarding to her eyes.

His hoodie makes a dull thud as it joins her mess of clothes already on the floor. She hungrily takes in the acres of brown skin she's unearthed—the delicate lines of his throat and collarbones, the bolder ones of his arms and chest, and that tattoo crawling over his jugular.

While she's running her hands all over him, Rajan says, unevenly, "See? No gunshot wounds."

She pauses, remembering how he'd clutched his shoulder earlier. She prods the joint with her thumb. And there. A sharp intake of breath, subtle but noticeable without the hoodie.

Her haze of *see-want-touch* instantly washes away. She sits up, forcing him up, too. "You *are* hurt!"

"It's nothing." He smooths Simran's hair back. "Just my shoulder, that's all, I can keep going—"

"Let me see."

With a sigh, he rolls off her and onto his back. This view is surreal: Rajan in her bed, her strawberry-patterned sheets twisted around him. She swings a leg over his torso to straddle him. Funny how she suddenly feels completely comfortable doing this.

Rajan seems to think so, too, because he raises an eyebrow. Before he can comment, she prods his shoulder again, making him wince. "What happened?"

"It got dislocated."

"It *got* dislocated," she repeats. The passive voice is doing a lot of work in that sentence. "Spontaneously?"

He winks. "Exactly, Auntie."

It's clear he's not planning to discuss it. Well, at least it's back in place. Her eyes are again drawn to the black tattoo that crawls up his neck. It's jagged and bold, partially obscured by his shirt.

"Can I see?" Her fingers hover over him.

He laughs softly. "You can do anything you want." He turns his head into her pillow, baring his throat. The tattoo is a stylized crest: a lion's head silhouette, laurel leaves flaring over his collarbone, wickedly sharp lines surrounding it that flow into the base of his throat, almost touching the furious pulse usually obscured by a hoodie.

She leans down, her hair falling in a curtain around them, and presses her lips to it. He jerks a little, but she keeps going, and eventually, he settles back. She kisses up his throat, jaw, cheek—everywhere she can reach. She's wanted to do this longer than she can admit. When she pulls away, he's staring at her wide-eyed, like he doesn't know what to do with himself.

Warmth fills her chest. How does he not realize how much she adores him? He must. He *must*. She kisses his mouth again. His arm circles her waist, and he moves up so they're kissing against the headboard. The only way she can think to describe it is drunk; she feels absolutely drunk, and she's certain of this despite never having been drunk before. Her thoughts are foggy, her body out of control, and she is acting on every impulse that fires through her brain.