

Chapter 28

Rhoda leaves the table abruptly and runs over to Galen. She takes him by the hand before leading him from the room.

Meanwhile, Kallias's hand slides to the inside of my thigh. I don't know how he manages it while also bringing food to his lips. I nearly drop my spoon when his thumb rubs over an especially sensitive spot. I'm so glad I opted for a dress with thin skirts today.

Even though it makes it impossible to focus on a single

word Hestia is saying.

Something about inviting me to visit with her at Lord Paulos's estate. Or maybe—

Kallias's hand slides higher.

Oh, that wicked man.

"Forgive me," I say, standing from the table, "but I'm not feeling so well. I think I'll retire to my rooms."

I practically run from the table, hoping to hide the heat in my cheeks and my quickened breath. I don't spare Kallias a glance.

* * *

WHEN I REACH MY ROOM, I dismiss all the servants who had begun moving my things over to Kallias's rooms. They appear to have made it through my vanity and washroom but stopped just shy of the wardrobe.

Perhaps I should consider a cool bath.

There's a knock, followed by the door opening. Kallias, of

can trace the same path he did under the table, only this time on my bare skin. Meanwhile, his lips are exploring the back of my neck, and I'm trapped, helpless to do anything but feel him as his fingers explore higher and higher.

When I can't take it any longer, I push off from the wall, spin to face him. His lips find mine, and his fingers are in my hair, pulling out the pins I used to hold it up this morning.

I place my hands at my back, trying to reach the laces holding my dress together. I need it off. Now. There is too much between his body and mine.

Once he realizes what I'm doing, he says, "No." He steps backward. "No," he repeats.

And I think I might scream if he tries to stop this, if he—

"Let me," he adds.

In mere seconds my dress is gone, and I'm before him in my chemise.

He looks me over slowly, at the skin he can view beneath the practically see-through material.

"If I were a better man, I would send you away," he says.

course.

"You're unwell? Why didn't you say—"

I throw myself at him, layering hot, openmouthed kisses on him. Though startled at first, he soon returns them in kind. Lavender-mint fills my senses, and his mouth has the light taste of wine.

I lean him against the nearest wall, fusing our bodies together, let my hands slide the jacket off his shoulders.

"I'm just fine," I say as I pull back slightly to deal with a button that's impeding my progress. "You, however, are in trouble."

"For what?" he asks innocently.

"Distracting me to the point of not being able to eat my meal."

He spins us around, spins *me* around, so my front is pressed against the wall, my head turned to the side to look at him.

"That doesn't seem right," he says. "All I did was..."

And then he's bending down, pulling up my skirts so he

"My life is dangerous. There's always someone trying to kill me. Even if this threat has been dealt with, there will be others. You could get hurt by being close to me."

"Good thing you're not a better man." I take off his cravat, start on the buttons of his shirt. "Why?" I ask. "Why didn't you take me last night?"

"I wasn't sure if you wanted to. Or if you wanted to wait until after the wedding. You didn't—"

"I want to." I rip off the last button after it slips through my fingers for the second time.

And then he carries me to the bed.

The Shadow King, it turns out, was well worth the wait.

* * *

THE FORMER QUEEN'S SITTING room is now *my* sitting room. I still have a mind to redecorate it, but for now it's the perfect place for Rhoda, Hestia, and I to spend some time alone.

Especially when I have so much to tell them.

The Shadows Between Us by Tricia Levenseller

Chapter 27

Then Kallias lifts me, holds me with one arm at my back and the other **beneath** my knees. My arms go to his neck, and I draw his face toward mine.

"I wanted to do this the very first time I saw you," I say before our lips touch.

And then I'm aflame.

There is no softness or patience to this kiss. For Kallias, it is one he has waited a whole year for. And for me, I feel as

though I've waited my whole life.

He stumbles slightly as he tries to veer around the tub without breaking the kiss, and I laugh against his lips before he silences me with his mouth.

I don't know how he manages not to drop me. But he makes it all the way to my bed. All while giving the utmost attention to my lips.

I'm flat on my back while he holds himself above me, his mouth moving to investigate the slope of my neck.

"Promise me—" I start, and then I lose my train of thought as he finds a spot at the base of my throat and runs his teeth across it.

I put my hands on his shoulders, pushing him away for a moment, just so I can collect my thoughts. "Promise me you won't send me away because I'm the one making you mortal. Promise me you won't change your mind later and decide I'm not enough for the price of mortality."

His breathing is ragged, but he manages to focus. "I swear it, Alessandra. You're not going anywhere. You're mine."

He sits back on his knees and starts unbuttoning his shirt.

I follow his fingers with my eyes, watching as each inch of his beautiful skin is revealed.

I don't like being on uneven footing, so I sit up, too. He draws his shirt away from his chest and tosses it to the ground, and I understand.

I place the palm of my hand flat against his chest, and he closes his eyes. He hasn't been touched in so long. And what he wants right now—what he needs—is to be touched.

My hands do a thorough search of his chest, and then I replace them with my lips, feeling every muscle, every slope, every smooth and coarse surface.

I lay him back, climb atop him, let him feel the weight of my body. My hair slides against his cheeks as I kiss the stubble at his chin, and then I move to his neck, up to his ear, grab the lobe between my teeth and tongue.

And then, as though he can't stand it anymore, he rolls us, effectively sliding me underneath him. My dress hitches up, and one of his thighs goes between mine, nudging upward—

And then I'm gasping, but he covers the sound with his mouth.

I can't think. I can't breathe. I can't—

Kallias slows the kiss. Draws each connection of our lips out almost lazily, as if he has all the time in the world.

My senses return, and I just enjoy the feel of him, the heat of him, the way his clever lips move across mine.

The Shadow King is the most patient man in the world. He kisses me for hours. He plays with me, speeding the kisses up for a time and then slowing them down, as if to see how close he can bring himself to the brink of control before calming back down.

He never takes off his pants. He never takes off my dress. He doesn't even let his hands stray to fun places.

And I'm so terrified that he'll change his mind. That he'll send me away. That he'll decide he doesn't want me anymore—as Hektor did—that I don't try to push anything. As badly as I want him, I let him control the pace and speed at which we go.

Epilogue

His lips brush mine, the stubble on his cheeks tickling my skin. "Have you forgotten last night already? I thought it was the best yet."

"You say that after every time."

"Every night with you is the best."

He kisses me properly then, deeply, slowly, beautifully—as though it were a dance. He tastes like the strawberries he just ate.

I swear this will never get old. Because I know what it is not to be able to touch him, every caress of his skin is a gift I never thought we'd get to have. I cannot believe that he chose me, long before I ever dared to choose him. He gave up forever for this.

I would do the very same.

Just when I think to deepen the kiss, Kallias pulls back. "Also, I'm very good with my hands."

His fingers pull up the skirt of the nightdress I wear. He keeps his eyes on mine while his hands stroke my skin. My eyes close at the sensation, despite wanting to watch him watch me.

I feel his lips at my ear. "Let's also not forget how well I multitask."

Then his lips are on my neck, trailing hot kisses everywhere while his hands move higher and higher up my thighs. At one point, I try to pull him in for a kiss, but he says, "No, just let me watch you."

At some point, Kallias maneuvers me to a wall to keep me upright. His fingers don't still until I'm completely undone.

This book is part of a series.



The boy has trauma from a school shooting he survived from.

While she's babbling, I look down at her feet and see she's standing right on top of my name. *Simon* disappears beneath her sandals. She's so close. I drop the dog harness and bolt sideways three steps and throw up all over the orange day lilies.

Everyone is staring, everyone, and Joyce from the leadership team is knocking on the office window, trying to get a teacher out here—her fists make sharp glass clacks.

I lean forward, my fingers clawing into my kneecaps. "Simon..." I hear upsoes, and then Agate is rubbing a hand up and down between my shoulders. "What's wrong?"

I can't believe my ears. "What's wrong?!" I'm jerking upright, I'm spinning around. "What's wrong!" I shout. Agate takes a step back. Her big

eyes are wide like craters. "They built a shrine like I'm dead, Agate, and you're talking about space aliens!"

"But, Simon, I—Is this about your trauma and anxiety?"

"Of course it's about my trauma and anxiety! All I wanted was to fly under the radar! Do you remember, I told you that? And you said there wasn't any radar!"

"But there isn't any radar," she says—and for the first time Agate has a small voice. I am screaming at her but her voice is small.

"Then why is everybody staring at me?" I spin around and throw my hands into the air. Hercules barks. "Hey, everybody! My name is Simon O'Keeffe! I survived the Eagle Crest school shooting and all I got was this lousy T-shirt!"

Agate slaps her fists against her thighs. It makes a sharp sound, over and over, and I wince, I wince, I wince. There's throw up all over the day lilies. There's slug holes in the hostas by the brick stairs. There's orange on the steps. There's my name smeared and trampled.

The bell rings, a real hammer hitting a real bell, sounding like a real catastrophe. My body jerks again—like it has wanted to with every bell, thirteen times a day for four months—but this time I let it. This time I turn and run.

The Sound of Stars by Alecia Dow

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"Dallas." His eyes take in my curves and hair, my breasts. Before the invasion, I remember Alice telling me that Dallas had a thing for black girls. Gross.

I step back. I'm not desperate. In fact, since I'd rather die instead of becoming a zombie like Dad, I'd rather die a virgin, too. The idea of doing something intimate, of being naked, being touched, held...by a stranger like Dallas, gives me goose bumps and turns my stomach. I know I'm ace, or at least on the spectrum of that, but still, a voice in me whispers: *You're going to die anyway, why not try something new?*

I ignore that voice. "Have you seen Alice?"

He turns away. "Alice is in Wonderland." He cocks his head, and I follow the direction to where Alice is on Jackson Hughes's lap, kissing him like her life depends on it and grinding as if her body requires it. I shrug. I can wait.

"We can join them?"

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"Goodbye, Janelle Baker. The best damn person in here!" Her voice carries across the room as the guards struggle to open the doors. "Goodbye, Jackson Hughes. May your dick fall off!" And then she screams the lyrics to the Starry Eyed's "These Starry Dreams" as the doors close behind her.

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trying to communicate something a certain way...it's difficult for me. I'm also afraid I might be bad at sex."

Ellie gasps, swerving the truck a little. "What?"

"I believe you call it sex, yes? When two people engage in intercourse?"

He sounds confused.

Her eyebrows rise. "Yes."

"I am worried I am bad at it." His shame hangs heavy in the truck.

"Why?"

"Because my partner—her name was Orsa—didn't seem satisfied."

MORRIS remembers the way he sloppily tore off his clothes at the sight of her naked body, and his clumsy attempts to please her. Orsa's face glazed over in boredom; not once did she smile. No Ilori do, really, but he had hoped... She reminded him of his labmade birth nothing short of three times before their first and last encounter. Afterward, she'd said it felt mechanical, and didn't elaborate further on why.

MORRIS can hear Ellie's heart racing, distracting him from the memory, which is most welcome. "Does it make you uncomfortable to discuss intercourse, Ellie?"

Her cheeks pink, but her gaze stays glued to the road. "Well, maybe a little. Humans don't normally discuss it. But...I don't mind discussing it with you."

"Was your first experience satisfactory?"

"Um...you know what? Let's just talk about you." Her voice is pitched higher than normal, and he worries she might be slightly ill. "How do you

"We've known each other—what—eleven or twelve days?" I bite the inside of my cheek to tamp down my heart.

"And that is all it took." His gaze drops to my lips.

I lean forward to kiss him. Never in my life did I imagine that, in a series of eleven or twelve days, I, Janelle Baker, would be kissed three times. But now it's happened, and I have to say, I really enjoy it. Alice's kiss was sad but filled with platonic love. Morris's kiss is...filled with desire and a very different sort of love. The kind of love that makes your stomach warm, and your heart flip in your chest like it just doesn't know what to do.

The seconds turn to minutes, and the softness turns to passion. Next thing I know, I've straddled his lap, and the steering wheel is poking into my back, but I pay it no mind. I'm lost in Morris, and he's just as lost in me. Every place our bodies touch feels like fire—deliciously warm fire—when all I've known is the cold.

His hands are firm around my waist, and the world falls away around us. Heat blasts through every dark and distant thought that warns me that time is running out. That we don't belong together. That this thing is too wild to be tamed. Right now, all I want is to live; to be truly alive and human, with an Ilori boy who inspired love in me.

Stealing Parker by Miranda Kenneally

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Back in the locker room, I overheard a couple girls saying that all I do in gym class is stare at Coach Hoffman, so I told myself not to look at him anymore.

But here I am on Friday night, making out with him in his truck. Dark and midnight. He touches me through my jeans and kisses me hard. The taste of bubble gum fills my mouth.

"You make me so hot," he says, pulling my leg to wrap around his waist.

It all feels so weird. I want it, yet I don't, but I'm not going to stop because it feels too good.

"I want to take this further," he says, gasping, pressing his hardness against my thigh. "But we need to wait until your birthday. Probably until after you graduate."

"Take this further how?" I reply, nibbling on his ear, making him groan and breathe faster.

His hand sneaks up my shirt. "You know, sleep together."

"I'm not ready for that," I whisper, clutching his shirt.

He looks in my eyes before closing his. "Most people I know do it on the second or third date."

"I'm not sure I want to." I avoid his eyes.

"It's fine," he mumbles before starting to kiss me again. His stubble scratches my chin. "Can we do something else, at least? For now?"

"What?"

"Will you...?" He unzips his jeans.

He wants me to put my mouth on it. "I can't," I gasp, ashamed at the thought.

"Can I touch you?" he whispers, unbuttoning my jeans. He slides them down my legs and stares at my lacy white underwear. I've never gone this far with a boy, and the look on his face is so sexy I tug on his jeans, revealing black boxer briefs. He pushes my panties aside, making me moan softly as he works a finger inside me.

Later I straddle him and he wraps his hands around my waist and we kiss and kiss, only thin cotton separating us. I get so caught up in wanting to know what this feels like with a man that I nearly forget he hasn't even taken me out on a real date yet.

Stars & Smoke by Marie Lu

Chapter: Deleted Scene

neck.

"Are we friends now?" he whispered, leaning instinctively toward her, heart hammering. He could hear the blood rushing in his ears.

"Trust me," she whispered back, "we're better off when we're not."

And before Winter could stop himself, he leaned forward and kissed her.

It wasn't as if he hadn't kissed a girl before. He'd had plenty of relationships and countless flings. But he had imagined kissing Sydney a thousand times, had wondered if he would ever be able to work up the courage to do it. And here he was, suddenly pressed against her in a dark corridor.

She kissed him back, urgently. He could smell the scent of her, wind and smoke and jasmine. Her body radiated heat. His fingers brushed the line of her jaw, then combed through her hair. He could feel her hands on him, too, sliding against his chest down to his waist, a finger hooking on his belt and tugging him closer. Every touch sent an electric current

to his door at all, where he fumbled for his key card. Even now, he had the sense to look both ways down the corridor.

Then they were inside the room, and he was pushing her against the closed door.

"This is a bad idea," he whispered, even as his hands slid under her shirt and along the smooth skin of her back until he found the hook of her bra.

"I know," Sydney whispered back. But she didn't stop him, not when he unhooked the clasp at her back and let his hands roam, and not when he tugged open the top button of her jeans. She just closed her eyes and tilted her head back, letting him kiss her along her jaw and her neck to her collarbone. She was pulling his belt loose, and he leaned toward her in response.

If they said anything else after that, Winter couldn't remember it. All he could recall was touching her until she wrapped her arms around his neck and cried out, his hand steadying himself against the wall as she touched him back, his body shivering at her every move. He remembered lifting her

through him. He pushed her against the wall until he could feel all of her against him, and through the fog in his mind, he felt her hands on his neck, cool against his skin. His fingers trailed against the edge of her shirt, aching to tug it up, wanting to be closer to her. She seemed to wrap around his entire mind until he couldn't think about anything but the feeling of her hair brushing against his face and the touch of her hands on his skin.

This had to be a dream. He couldn't bear the thought of waking from it.

"Upstairs," she breathed against his lips.

"What?" he gasped, unsure he'd heard her right.

"Upstairs," she repeated, and tugged his hand.

Somehow, they stumbled into the stairwell and made their way up a floor, then another, halting twice as their lips found each other again. Winter felt drunk, the world spinning around him. All he could focus on was the tug of her hand as they made their way to the third floor, out of the stairwell, and into the hall. It seemed like a miracle that they managed to make it

in a blur, her legs wrapped around him, their bodies crashing down on the couch because it was closer than the bed. Her hands in his hair, her head thrown back, lips parted. They weren't even fully undressed, not that it mattered. Their movements were frenetic, rushed, desperate, as if they knew they were on borrowed time. She arched against him, moving in sync with him, and he gritted his teeth and pressed his face into the crook of her neck and squeezed his eyes shut.

"Syd ..." he murmured, his voice hoarse and halting. "I can't—you're—"

But then she was kissing him, and he forgot what it was he wanted to say, felt her tongue slide against his, and lost every thought flitting through his mind. She was so soft and hot; she felt so good.

Sydney—

He heard himself murmuring her name as if in a dream. He loved the sound of the syllables on his tongue, loved whispering it against her skin.

Winter, he heard her say back through her gasps. You feel

Their words died again. All he could hear was the movement of their bodies together and their breath in the air, her gasps as she pulled him closer, his shuddering groan. And as he lost himself in her, all he could think was that they shouldn't be here, that this moment was an impossible moment, that this was an alternate universe that could never be.

All he knew was the intoxicating, awful, dangerous realization that he was falling for her.

A Study in Drowning by Ava Reid

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wet, too. His shirt stuck to his skin, translucent with rainwater.

"All right," he said. "I'll stay."

The heat of his body bled through the blankets. Effy sat up and inched closer. She rested her chin on his shoulder very carefully, as if she were setting a glass down on a table and didn't want it to make a discordant sound.

She felt him breathing slowly, shoulders rising and falling. He turned his head toward her.

He kissed her, or she kissed him—it mattered only as much as it mattered whether the house was sinking or the sea was rising. Once their lips touched, Effy could think of nothing else.

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"This won't be anything like that, Effy. I promise. I'll be kind to you."

She believed him. It almost made her want to cry. Carefully she began to work at the buttons on his shirt, baring his throat and then his chest, his abdomen and navel. She had never seen someone stripped down like this before and she was momentarily stunned by the *vitality* of him—the signs of life in every clench of muscle, every shift that made his bones move under his skin.

Effy couldn't help but touch him all over, there and there and there, his rib cage and sternum and, finally, the triangle of skin above his belt buckle.

thrilled her and scared her in equal measure. She'd wanted him for so long, and now she knew—there was no doubt—that he wanted her back.

She managed at last to undo his belt and free him of his pants, and he lifted the covers and slid into the bed beside her.

Preston took her face into his hands and, with exceptional gentleness, lowered her back down onto the pillows.

They broke apart for a moment, Preston half on top of her now, propping himself up on his elbows. A bit of water trickled down from the back of his neck, past his collarbone. He said, "Effy, are you sure?"

She nodded. She wanted to say *yes*, but somehow the word got tangled up in her throat. Instead she said, in a small voice, "I've never been with anyone before. I've kissed boys—and then there was Master Corbenic, but that was just . . ."

Preston shivered under her touch; she heard him swallow hard. His hands slid under her sweater. "Can I?"

"Yes," she said, finding the word at last.

He took her sweater by the hem and pulled it over her head. *She* was bare then, and he kissed her again, softly dragging his mouth along her jawline, down her throat. Effy gave a quiet gasp as his fingers found her breast, but he only moved his hand over it and held it, as if to protect her from the coldness of the air.

Her own hands had stopped at his belt buckle, vexed by it, heart suddenly skipping beats. She felt him again through his trousers, stiff and urgent. It

She felt her cheeks grow warm. There was no cold left in her now at all. "Please be gentle."

"Oh. I will. I swear it." He shifted, slowly parting her thighs.

There was a little bit of pain, but it was like a breath that was tightly held: it gave way to seemingly infinite pleasure upon release.

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She whimpered quietly into his shoulder, a sound that was half surprise, half surrender. The yielding was easy when the assault was so tender. The land would never protest if the sea washed over it with what could not be called anything else but *affection*.

They matched each other inhale for inhale, Preston's mouth close to her ear. When his breathing sped up, Effy could tell he was very close, but then he slowed again, strokes long and deliberate.

"Don't," she whispered petulantly against his throat. "Don't stop."

"I just wanted to tell you," he said, "when this is over, I'll take care of you, too. If you want me to."

Effy closed her eyes, and even the blackness there behind them was bright with false stars. "I do."

When it *was* over, Effy lay beside Preston, both of them concealed by the green covers. She lay on her belly, he on his back, but they faced each other with their cheeks pressed against the pillows.

The four walls around them seemed impenetrable. Effy scarcely heard the rain at all.

"I don't want to go back out there," she said, in a tiny muffled voice. "Not ever."

The Song of Achilles by Madeline Miller

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the year before our fathers named us men, and we would begin to wear not just tunics but capes and chitons as well. A marriage would be arranged for Achilles, and I might take a wife, if I wished to. I thought again of the serving girls with their dull eyes. I remembered the snatches of conversation I had overheard from the boys, the talk of breasts and hips and coupling.

She's like cream, she's that soft.

Once her thighs are around you, you'll forget your own name.

The boys' voices had been sharp with excitement, their color high. But when I tried to imagine what they spoke of, my mind slid away, like a fish who would not be caught.

Other images came in their stead. The curve of a neck bent over a lyre, hair gleaming in firelight, hands with their flickering tendons. We were together all day, and I could not escape: the smell of the oils he used on his feet, the glimpses of skin as he dressed. I would wrench my gaze from him and remember the day on the beach, the coldness in his eyes and

how he ran from me. And, always, I remembered his mother.

I began to go off by myself, early in the mornings, when Achilles still slept, or in the afternoons, when he would practice his spear thrusts. I brought a flute with me, but rarely played it. Instead I would find a tree to lean against and breathe the sharp drift of cypress-scent, blown from the highest part of the mountain.

Slowly, as if to escape my own notice, my hand would move to rest between my thighs. There was shame in this thing that I did, and a greater shame still in the thoughts that came with it. But it would be worse to think them inside the rose-quartz cave, with him beside me.

It was difficult sometimes, after, to return to the cave.

"Where were you?" he'd ask.

"Just—" I'd say, and point vaguely.

He'd nod. But I knew he saw the flush that colored my cheeks.

THE SUMMER GREW HOTTER, and we sought the river's shade, its

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He was on his side, watching me. I had not heard him turn. *I never hear him.* He was utterly motionless, that stillness that was his alone. I breathed, and was aware of the bare stretch of dark pillow between us.

He leaned forward.

Our mouths opened under each other, and the warmth of his sweetened throat poured into mine. I could not think, could not do anything but drink him in, each breath as it came, the soft movements of his lips. It was a miracle.

I was trembling, afraid to put him to flight. I did not know what to do, what he would like. I kissed his neck, the span of his chest, and tasted the salt. He seemed to swell beneath my touch, to ripen. He smelled like almonds and earth. He pressed against me, crushing my lips to wine.

He went still as I took him in my hand, soft as the delicate velvet of petals. I knew Achilles' golden skin and the curve of his neck, the crooks of his elbows. I knew how pleasure looked on him. Our bodies cupped each other like hands.

The blankets had twisted around me. He shucked them from us both. The air over my skin was a shock, and I shivered. He was outlined against the painted stars; Polaris sat on his shoulder. His hand slipped over the quickened rise and fall of my belly's breathing. He stroked me gently, as though smoothing finest cloth, and my hips lifted to his touch. I pulled him to me, and trembled and trembled. He was trembling, too. He sounded as though he had been running far and fast.

I said his name, I think. It blew through me; I was hollow as a reed hung up for the wind to sound. There was no time that passed but our breaths.

I found his hair between my fingers. There was a gathering inside me, a beat of blood against the movement of his hand. His face was pressed against me, but I tried to clutch him closer still. Do not stop, I said.

He did not stop. The feeling gathered and gathered till a hoarse cry leapt from my throat, and the sharp flowering drove me, arching, against him.

It was not enough. My hand reached, found the place of his pleasure. His eyes closed. There was a rhythm he liked, I could

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feel it, the catch of his breath, the yearning. My fingers were ceaseless, following each quickening gasp. His eyelids were the color of the dawn sky; he smelled like earth after rain. His mouth opened in an inarticulate cry, and we were pressed so close that I felt the spurt of his warmth against me. He shuddered, and we lay still.

Slowly, like dusk-fall, I became aware of my sweat, the dampness of the covers, and the wetness that slid between our bellies. We separated, peeling away from each other, our faces puffy and half-bruised from kisses. The cave smelled hot and sweet, like fruit beneath the sun. Our eyes met, and we did not speak. Fear rose in me, sudden and sharp. This was the moment of truest peril, and I tensed, fearing his regret.

He said, "I did not think—" And stopped. There was nothing in the world I wanted more than to hear what he had not said.

"What?" I asked him. *If it is bad, let it be over quickly.* "I did not think that we would ever—" He was hesitating over every word, and I could not blame him.

"I did not think so either," I said.

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warmth and ease. After the tenderness had come more passion; we had been slower then, and lingering, a dreamy night that stretched on and on. Now, watching him stir beside me, his hand resting on my stomach, damp and curled as a flower at dawn, I was nervous again. I remembered in a rush the things I had said and done, the noises I had made. I feared that the spell was broken, that the light that crept through the cave's entrance would turn it all to stone. But then he was awake, his lips forming a half-sleepy greeting, and his hand was already reaching for mine. We lay there, like that, until the cave was bright with morning, and Chiron called.

We ate, then ran to the river to wash. I savored the miracle of being able to watch him openly, to enjoy the play of dappled light on his limbs, the curving of his back as he dove beneath the water. Later, we lay on the riverbank, learning the lines of each other's bodies anew. This, and this and this. We were like gods at the dawning of the world, and our joy was so bright we could see nothing else but the other.

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The door closed behind us, and we were alone in a modest room. The walls were hung with tapestries, and the floor was thick with sheepskin rugs. There was a bed, pushed against the window, to catch the hint of breeze.

She pulled her dress over her head, and dropped it on the floor.

"Do you think I am beautiful?" she asked me.

I was grateful for a simple answer. "Yes," I said. Her body was small and delicately made, with just the barest rise of belly where the child grew. My eyes were drawn down to what I had never seen before, a small furred area, the dark hairs spreading lightly upwards. She saw me looking. Reaching for my hand she guided me to that place, which radiated heat like the embers of a fire.

The skin that slipped against my fingers was warm and delicate, so fragile I was almost afraid I would tear it with my touch. My other hand reached up to stroke her cheek, to trace the softness beneath her eyes. The look in them was terrible to see: there was no hope or pleasure, only determination.

Almost, I fled. But I could not bear to see her face broken

open with more sorrow, more disappointment—another boy who could not give her what she wanted. So I allowed her hands, fumbling a little, to draw me to the bed, to guide me between her thighs, where tender skin parted, weeping slow warm drops. I felt resistance and would have drawn back, but she shook her head sharply. Her small face was tight with concentration, her jaw set as if against pain. It was a relief for us both when at last the skin eased, gave way. When I slipped into that sheathing warmth within her.

I will not say I was not aroused. A slow climbing tension moved through me. It was a strange, drowsy feeling, so different from my sharp, sure desires for Achilles. She seemed hurt by this, my heavy-lidded repose. *More indifference.* And so I let myself move, made sounds of pleasure, pressed my chest against hers as if in passion, flattening her soft, small breasts beneath me.

She was pleased then, suddenly fierce, pulling and pushing me harder and faster, her eyes lighting in triumph at the changes in my breath. And then, at the slow rising of tide inside me, her legs, light but firm, wrapped around my back,

bucking me into her, drawing out the spasm of my pleasure.

Afterwards we lay breathless, side by side but not touching. Her face was shadowed and distant, her posture strangely stiff. My mind was still muddled from climax, but I reached to hold her. I could offer her this, at least.

But she drew away from me and stood, her eyes wary; the skin beneath them was dark as bruises. She turned to dress, and her round heart-shaped buttocks stared at me like a reproach. I did not understand what she had wanted; I only knew I had not given it. I stood and pulled on my tunic. I would have touched her, stroked her face, but her eyes warned me away, sharp and full. She held open the door. Hopelessly, I stepped over the threshold.

“Wait.” Her voice sounded raw. I turned. “Tell him good-bye,” she said. And then closed the door, dark and thick between us.

Pg. 415

I WOKE BEFORE DAWN and felt the first twinging cold of fall in the air. It was a festival day, the harvest of first-fruits to the god Apollo. Achilles was warm beside me, his naked body heavy with sleep. The tent was very dark, but I could just see the features of his face, the strong jaw and gentle curves of his eyes. I wanted to wake him and see those eyes open. A thousand thousand times I had seen it, but I never tired of it.

My hand slid lightly over his chest, stroking the muscles beneath. We were both of us strong now, from days in the white tent and in the field; it shocked me sometimes to catch sight of myself. I looked like a man, broad as my father had been, though much leaner.

He shivered beneath my hand, and I felt desire rise in me. I drew back the covers so that I might see all of him. I bent and pressed my mouth to him, in soft kisses that trailed down his stomach.

Dawn stole through the tent flap. The room lightened. I saw the moment he woke and knew me. Our limbs slid against one

another, on paths that we had traced so many times before, yet still were not old.

The Summer of Bitter and Sweet by Jen Ferguson

Taken

~~Take~~ from the author's "Acknowledgments" section. I wonder if this author's books belong in a K-12 library exclusively serving minors?

THE VIOLETS

They say the last person you should thank in traditional book acknowledgments is the person you are currently having sex with, but hey, demi here, so let's break the mold. The last people I'll thank are instead the people who I do this work for, the ones I'm always advocating for: my students and the BIPOC and queer teens of the world. You are loved, you are cared for, you are, as they say, your ancestors' wildest dreams, and I thank you for everything you're doing to make this world one where everyone can thrive. You are, in a word, or in a few, absolutely, completely fucking incredible. You have all my love and support, always. Thank you.

This Song is (Not) for You by Laura Nowlin

Ramona develops feelings and an emotional attachment to Tom – but there relationship doesn't seem to be progressing physically beyond holding hands and caressing. Sam is in love with Ramona and wants to be her boyfriend. Tom tells Ramona he isn't a person who is sexually attracted to anyone, but still wants a relationship. Ramona doesn't want to give up her relationship and emotional connection with Tom, but still wants a relationship that's physical. So, everyone agrees that Ramona can be in a relationship with both boys in the way that each enjoys.

POLYAMORY?!?!?!?

A Thousand Pieces of You *by Claudia Gray*

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"Paul," I murmur, "call me by my name."

"You know I cannot."

"Just once. Just once I want to hear you say my name."

Paul brings his face close to mine, so close we are nearly touching. "Marguerite."

And we are lost.

I'm the one who breaks the last rule, the final taboo—the one who kisses him. But then he surrenders. He holds nothing back. We tangle together, kissing desperately, clutching at the few clothes we still wear, hardly able to breathe or think or do anything other than lose ourselves in each other.

When I tug at the hem of his shirt, he lifts it up to help me toss it away. Then I shrug the straps of my camisole away from

my shoulders; I've never thought of my skinny body as beautiful, not until I've seen Paul's eyes darken at the sight of me, not until he lowers himself over me to kiss me more passionately and hungrily than before.

"Marguerite," Paul pants against my shoulder. "We must not—we *must* not—"

"We must." I arch my body against his, an invitation no man could ever mistake. He kisses me again, our mouths open, and the way we move draws us even closer.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Paul, yes, please—"

His mind is fighting it even as his body responds. "Forgive me. Forgive me."

"There's nothing to—oh. *Oh*."

My fingers dig into his shoulders, and I bite my lower lip. Yet I move my body to meet his, to welcome him completely.

Paul buries his face in the curve of my neck. His entire body shakes with the effort to go slow. He gasps, "You're—are you—"

I kiss his forehead. My hands trace the length of his back,

the bend of his hips, reveling in the firmness of muscle and bone. Instead of answering him with words, I move against him. He groans, rakes his teeth along my throat and follows my lead.

"I love you," he whispers. "I've always loved you."

"I love you, too," I say, and I mean it, even if I'm not sure whether I love one of him, or both of him, or all.

Middle School + up

The Truth is by NoNieqa Ramos

Note: Danny is actually really a girl – (trans)

Shit – 99

Hell – 58

Fuck – 51

Lord's name in vain – 50+

Damn – 49

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with us. My mother was always Blanca's mother—at least until Blanca went boy crazy. Even then, Mami gave us the same lectures: *Remember, girls. These guys, the only deposit they make is when you sleep with them and after the kid comes, their checkbook is empty.*

Pg. 75

Blanca (wiping her hands with a napkin, practically begging):

Isn't there anybody you're crushing on?

Me: Blanca, think about the word crush. Does this word not alarm your ass? It is assumed that at least one of the two people involved in the relationship is being flattened.

Blanca: That's one way to look at it. Or, you know. Crushed.

Flattened. Flat on your back.

Me: You are a prevert.

Blanca: Pervert, you dummy.

Me: Prevert. Because the only person you've kissed is me and you're already talking smack about losing your virginity.

Blanca couldn't stand the idea of not knowing what we were doing when we had our first kisses. And kissing our hands was out of the freakin question. She said she thought of Thor when she kissed me. (So maybe I cracked her head a little on the landing.) I thought about sex. Like how I wished I could just get sex over with a friend so it wasn't this momentous deal I had to dread for the next five years. Guys get to wait with anticipation. They get lucky, they get street cred. What do we get? Bloody sheets and a rep. My

moms says that hasn't changed and it never will.

Blanca (shaking crumbs from the paper bag into her mouth):

It's not smack. It's reality. It's gonna happen one day. I mean you are in high school now.

Me: What is the point of sex in high school? If you're lucky enough not to be date-raped you're outed as a slut . . .

Blanca (leaning back against the tombstone): Damn, Verdad! You're such a romantic!

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By "distracted" she means no crushes, no lust, no sex. She and Blanca butted heads a lot after Blanca went from *Aw, Hello Kitty!* to *Whoa, bello titty* in like zero to twenty seconds. When we were little, Blanca was the one who went

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Danny crawls over and sets his chin on my shoulder. The tickle of breath warms my neck and I'm tingling from my head to my toes. My body is a slave and my heart is a beggar.

"You smell good, too," Danny whispers. "Like cloves."

His lips move against my skin and I feel every part of my body, separate and whole, light and heavy, my thighs soft and my nipples hard, between my legs warm and wet.

He lifts me onto his lap and I wrap my legs around him.

Danny brushes my hair from my shoulders and I know I won't cut a single hair he touched. "Like cardamom."

Those lips, kiss by kiss, slide across my chin up to my lips. "And honey."

We're leaning into each other hard now, our mouths both open like we were drowning and just coming up for our first breath of air. We kiss harder and deeper like we're starved, so long marooned on the islands of ourselves. Our bodies and tongues intertwine and there's no way to know where his ends and mine begins. The more we take in each other, the more starved I get. We are pressed—breasts to breasts—heart to heart. There is no left or right. Black or white. He lays me back and starts to unbutton my jeans, but I grab his hand.

"Sorry," he says in my iron grip. "I should've asked. We

Pg. 200

woman. We can leave the jeans on, you know." He kisses me. Presses against me and slips his hand inside my panties . . .

It feels good, but I'm overthinking everything: my body and his. Is it my turn next? What do I do? But he squelches all that. Holds my wandering hand and kisses it.

The outside door unlocks and there's the unmistakable sound of my mother's keys.

We pull apart and the chair in front of my desk is still spinning across the room with me in it as my moms walks into the room. *Weeeeeee!*

"Ay!" My moms holds her heart. "You scared the shit out of me."

"Sorry about that." Danny stands up.

"Ay!" She takes a breath. "Christ."

Pg. 217

Dyke is a dumb word. How is that even an insult? Why not just call someone an end table? *You fucking end table! Don't be an end table.*

"I mean what's with the cross-dressing?" says Sujei. "I get gay, but a gay girl can still look like a girl. A gay guy can look like a guy. Unless you're in a rock band, what's with the makeup? Why so fucking complicated?"

I don't have an answer. Is Danny experimenting with gender? Am I? He the control, me the variable, and vice-versa. Could he decide tomorrow that he's a she and she is—a lesbian? Which would make me a lesbian. Right now he's a guy, so he is like—heterosexual? In which case, even if he has a vagina, that still makes me heterosexual?

Though the truth is my heart fell for Danny, and for whatever body he's in, before my brain or anyone else's had a chance to mess with it. I start picturing Danny in different

outfits—dresses, pants, a frock coat—and he's a snack in every single one. If he turned out to just be a girl who dresses (insert covert googling) "androgynous," or some other gender identity—the internet offers up *gender variant*, *gender fluid*, *nonbinary*, *bigender*, *pangender*—I'd still be into Danny. This convo with Titi Sujei is not about who Danny is, it's about who I am.

Sujei turns the volume on Jose way up. *Corazón corazón corazónooooooooooooon! How do you un-complicate your corazónooooooooon?* "What I'm saying is KISS."

"Huh?"

"Keep it simple, stupid. KISS. You know. K-I-S . . ."

"I get it."

We pull up across the street from the school. Sujei puts the car in park and lets the motor run.

"Bottom line is your mom loves you." Sujei puts the car

A Tyranny of Petticoats by Jessica Spotswood

Pg. 555

That night I asked Diane if she knew what it meant to be a "radical lesbian feminist." We were smoking and listening to music in my dorm room, lying on the rug, staring up at the stained white ceiling.

Diane had already told me she was a feminist by then. This was our first semester, when the idea of being a feminist still seemed scary. It sounded almost as bad as being a communist.

"Yeah, I've heard people talk about it down at the women's collective," Diane told me. "They call it *existential lesbian feminism*. It's about teaching men a lesson. The only way they'll learn we don't need them is if we really don't need them for *anything*. Get it?"

I nodded slowly. *Existential lesbian feminism*. A political philosophy based around women having sex with other women. And I'd thought regular feminism was extreme.

I wondered how women *did* have sex with other women. Maybe they'd . . . oh. *Oh*.

I blushed harder with every passing minute. The political philosophy sounded crazy, but the women-being-with-other-women part didn't sound like such a terrible thing.

"I think I get it," I told Diane.

Two weeks later, Diane came over to listen to music again, and this time I definitely got it. We both did. It was amazing, actually.

I'd never felt about anyone the way I felt about Diane. I'd had boyfriends in high school, and I'd flirted with men at college parties, but what she and I had after just those first few weeks was something else altogether.

The problem was, by the time the spring semester started, Diane wanted to tell other people about it.

"The whole point of being a lesbian feminist is to prove a point to the man," she said.

"Is this seriously just about politics to you?" I asked.

"Well, no. I mean, I also like you. A lot. But the personal is political, get it?"

"Not this time, it isn't."

Diane and I had started hanging out more with Floyd and the rest of the Students for a Democratic Society crowd by then. The men in SDS were cool, but, well, they were men. One night after a meeting we stayed up late writing a Students' Bill

Until Friday Night by Abbi Glines

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Maggie shivered in my arms, causing my heart to pump even faster. She liked this as much as I did. The look in her eyes said everything I was feeling.

"Lift your arms, Maggie," I instructed, not asking.

Without hesitation, she lifted her arms and let me take her shirt off. The delicate creamy skin of her shoulders made her look like an angel.

She closed her eyes and inhaled sharply when I slid the straps down her arms then pulled the bra away from her. "You're beautiful," I said breathlessly.

Leaning closer, I pressed a kiss to her neck, and

she swallowed hard. Her hands came up to grip my shoulders as if she needed to hold on. I liked that. No, I fucking loved that. I wanted her to hold on to me. To trust me.

With great control, I slowly kissed a path downward. She was watching me, her mouth slightly open. I'd never felt this close to anyone before.

"West," Maggie whispered my name as her hands gripped my arms tightly.

This was going to be my undoing. This girl. She was going to claim me.

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His hand settled firmly on my back, pressing my bare chest against his as his mouth covered mine again. "You feel so damn good," he whispered as he nibbled and licked at my lips. I agreed, he felt just as good.

I got so lost in his embrace, at first I didn't notice that his fingertips were grazing the inner waistband of my shorts.

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"Okay," I replied, knowing I'd never regret this with him.

He lifted his head, and those blue eyes flared with heat. I was trembling even before his hand slid down farther.

"Trust me?" His voice was thick and raspy.

I just nodded. I couldn't speak.

My heart was pounding so loudly, I could hear it. My body was on fire, about to shatter into a beautiful oblivion.

I'd said I'd be whatever he needed. I'd do whatever he needed me to do.

"What do you want from me?" I asked.

"I need you too much. I want you so much. You're just . . . I just . . . You're the only thing that makes the pain go away, Maggie."

He was trying to survive. I was giving him a reason to survive. He was taking from me. But I wanted to give myself to him.

I ran my hands over his hair and tried to comfort him. I knew he wasn't ready to hear me tell him I loved him. I wasn't sure he'd ever want to hear that. But I had to tell him a small portion of the truth.

"I want this. I want you like this. Don't apologize. What you're taking, I am giving you willingly."

Pg. 227

I shed the rest of my clothes after taking a condom out of my pocket. I was so nervous, my hands shook as I put it on.

As I lowered my body over hers, my chest tightened. Finally those eyes I'd come to dream about lifted to meet mine. There was a quiet confidence there. A trust I would cherish. One I couldn't lose.

With careful ease, I entered her, and she held on to me through it all. Never taking her eyes off mine.

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When he opened my door, he grabbed me and kissed me again before picking me up and putting me down on the ground. "We're going to fix your jersey," he said simply. Then took my hand, and we walked inside the field house.

It was deserted this morning, thank goodness. I didn't want to see naked guys. That would be very embarrassing. West took me past a row of lockers, then stopped once he got to the large ones on the end. I saw his last name written above a locker right before he opened it up.

"Take that off," he said as he reached into the locker to pull out a neatly folded jersey on the top shelf.

He was giving me his jersey. My heart rate picked

up as I quickly took off Brady's jersey. West turned to look at me and stopped. Instead of handing me the shirt, he stepped toward me and bent his head to kiss my exposed collarbone before burying his head in my neck and inhaling deeply.

I shivered but remained very still. I was afraid if I moved, it would break the spell. I didn't want him to stop. I loved having him close to me like this.

His hand slid around my waist, and he held me against him as his tongue began to take little licks of my neck, followed by kisses. I dropped Brady's jersey and grabbed West's arms to keep my knees from buckling.

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"Taste so good, smell so good," he whispered as his mouth moved lower, and he brushed his lips across the tops of my breasts several times. I watched him in fascination.

He lifted his eyes to look at me as he pulled my tank top down a little to continue his trail of kisses. "I need to stop. But I need you to tell me to stop." His voice was deep.

I didn't want him to stop. Getting to class had taken a backseat to this.

"If I tug this down any farther, I'm gonna want more. More than you need to give me in a dirty locker room. I swore to myself the next time I touched you like this, I'd have you somewhere special."

He had robbed me of words. I just stood there holding on to his arms as he cupped one of my breasts through my shirt and kissed the top of the other. Then he growled and closed his eyes tightly before dropping his hands and moving away. I felt cold with him gone. I wanted him back.

"Lift your arms," he said as he picked back up the jersey he'd gotten from his locker.

I did as I was told, and he slipped it over my head. Once he was happy that I had it on properly, he stepped back and looked at me. "Just my jersey, Maggie. No one else's. Ever. I don't want anyone's jersey touching you but mine. Keep this one. Wear it

Pg. 251

any damn time you want, but don't ever put Brady's on again."

Oh.

Okay.

Oh my.

I nodded and resisted the urge to wrap my arms around the shirt I was now wearing, and cuddle with it. It smelled like West. I was never going to want to wash it.

He grinned. "My girl. My fucking jersey."

Pg. 313

He kissed the corner of my mouth. "Let's just get to the good part. I excel at this scene," he whispered, then covered my mouth with his.

That first night I'd been so unsure. So much had changed since then. I knew exactly what to do now. I slid my hands up his arms, loving the way they flexed under my touch, before holding on to his shoulders.

Our tongues danced and teased while West's hands moved just under the bottom of my shirt and brushed against my skin. That definitely hadn't happened that night. But tonight I wanted it to. I lifted my hands higher and locked them around his neck, making my shirt rise and tempting West to touch more.

He did.

Both his hands moved up and cupped my breasts as a small cry that I couldn't help escaped me. I loved his hands on me and the way they made me feel.

Too suddenly he pulled back. "If I'd done this that night I would have expected you to knee me in the balls," he said, breathing hard.

"I probably would have fainted."

He kept his hands on me and brushed his thumb over my nipples through the satin of my bra. I shivered and squirmed, trying to get more.

"We aren't ready for this part of our night. I have a plan," he said, his eyes full of the same arousal I was feeling.

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"I thought this was your plan," I said, closing my eyes as he moved his fingertips just inside the satin of my bra.

"No, but it is a helluva lot better."

We are Okay by Nina Lacour

Pg. 169

"Remember how we used to practice kissing?" I asked, pulling the top off the whiskey.

"We were determined to be experts by the time we were sophomores."

"Experts," I said, laughing. I took a sip, and the burn of it surprised me. We were used to pilfered beers or vodka mixed with whatever juice was in our friends' pantries. "Here, drink at your own peril," I rasped.

Mabel took a sip, coughed.

"We were so giggly and nervous," I said, remembering us as freshmen. "We had no idea what it meant to be in high school. What we were supposed to act like, what we were supposed to talk about . . ."

"It was so much fun."

"What was?"

"All of it. Let me have another try with that." Her hand felt around in the dark for the bottle, and then she found it and I let go. She tipped her face toward the hazy moon. Handed the bottle back. I took a swig.

"Better this time," she said, and she was right. And with each subsequent sip it got easier to swallow, and soon my body felt heavy and my head swam, and everything Mabel said made me laugh and every memory I had was meaningful.

We were quiet then, for a little while, until she sat up.

"It's been a long time since we practiced," she said, crawling toward me until our noses touched. A laugh started in my throat, but then she put her mouth on mine.

Wet lips.

Soft tongue.

Her legs wrapped around my waist and we kissed harder. Soon we were lying in the sand, her salt-thick, tangled hair through my fingers.

She unzipped my parka. Her cold hands found their way under my sweater as she kissed my neck.

"What would Sister Josephine say?" I whispered.

I felt her smile against my collarbone.

It took her a couple tries to get my bra unclasped with one hand, but when she did, the cold air against my skin was nothing compared to the warmth of her breath. I unbuttoned her sweater, pushed her bra over her breasts without unfastening it. I had never felt so ravenous. It's not like my experience was vast. It's not like I was used to being touched this way. But even if I had already been kissed by dozens of mouths, I would have known this was different.

I loved her already.

With our jeans unfastened, Mabel's fingers grazing the elastic of my underwear, she said, "If we regret this tomorrow, we can blame it on the whiskey."

But the sky was fading from black to gray; it was already

tomorrow. And I didn't regret anything.

Pg. 227

It was a summer of denial. Of learning what Mabel's body could do for mine, what mine could do for hers. A summer spent in her white bed, her hair fanned over the pillow. A summer spent on my red rug, sunshine on our faces. A summer when love was everything, and we didn't talk about college or geography, and we rode buses and hopped in cars and walked city blocks in our sandals.

Tourists descended onto our beach, sat in our usual places, so we borrowed Ana's car and crossed the Golden Gate to find a tiny piece of ocean to have for ourselves. We ate fish-and-chips in a dark pub that belonged in a different country, and we collected beach glass instead of shells, and we kissed in the redwoods, we kissed in the water, we kissed in movie theaters all over the city during matinees and late-night showings. We

kissed in bookstores and record stores and dressing rooms. We kissed outside of the Lexington because we were too young to get in. We looked inside its doors at all the women there with short hair and long hair, lipstick and tattoos, tight dresses and tight jeans, button-ups and camisoles, and we pictured ourselves among them.

We Can't Keep Meeting Like This by Rachel Lynn Solomon

Pg 200

He draws me to him again, and in this tight space, it's so easy to mold my body to his, especially when I'm not in my stiff wedding planner shirt and slacks. My thin dress might as well be lingerie. There's more skin to explore, and that's exactly what he does, his hands running up my legs underneath the dress. "I like this by the way," he says, playing with the hem of it.

Pg. 201

What he must mean is that he likes the way it bunches up around my hips, the way his fingers meet my bare thighs just above my knees. I tug him down on top of me, one leg on either side of him, kissing him deeper. He could easily pull the dress over my head, but instead, one by one, he flicks open the buttons. When he gets the last one and I'm in my bra and underwear, he buries his face in my neck. "Give me a minute." He lets out a rough laugh, pressing his mouth into the spot where my neck meets me shoulder, dropping kisses lower and lower and lower, until he reaches my navel and I can't help giggling. I rub my hand over the front of his jeans, and he sucks in a breath. Maybe my memory is failing me, but hooking up has never been this fun. I knew this would erase any lingering weirdness from earlier this evening. "Our clothing ratio seems radically unfair." I reach for his shirt, and he helps me tug it over his head. It's cruel, really, that it's too dark for me to take in every detail of his chest, but I can use my hands to map him out. Without my dress in his way, his hand travels from thigh to hip, free of obstructions. "is this okay?" "Yes," I breathe out, but as soon as his fingers skim along the outside of my underwear, I feel my body tighten up. "Wait. Stop." He immediately pulls back. The nerves take over. "I'm sorry, it's just – me and cars..."

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The words start tumbling out. "I'm not even sure it was the car, actually," I say. "I've only...had sex...that one time. In the car. At least, sex in the way society usually defines sex, which is outdated and heteronormative, but, um. Yeah."

Pg. 203

"Are you saying you've never had an org – " I'm not sure why, but I can't bear to hear him utter the word. "With someone else?" I shake my head. "But you've had one before, in general? On your own?" I nod, hiding my burning face against the seat. "Hey." He rubs circles on my back. "You do it. I do it. Why is that embarrassing?" "I don't know," I admit.

"With other guys, when we were fooling around, there was always one clear end goal for them." I make a gesture with my hands that probably looks like that old Shake Weight commercial or opening a can of soda. The latter is possibly too on the nose. "It would take too long for me, so they'd get tired or bored or whatever, and they'd either stop, or I'd ask them to stop. Their end goal didn't always include..." "You having an orgasm." He finishes the word this time, and okay. It's not the worst word in the world. Not at all. "I can assure you," he continues, a fingertip brushing my ankle, "I am not going to get bored."

Pg. 204

"Okay," I say in the smallest voice. "Then... that sounds like it might be enjoyable." He grins this ridiculous grin, one that turns me inside out, and when he kisses me, I am just... gone. I'm not sure how long it takes. Frankly, I'm not thinking about that. All I know is the way his breath catches when he touches me, that he's gentle and focuses, that he talks to me. And then I grip his shoulders as his fingers move faster, faster, until everything else dissolves and it's just him and me and a brilliant warm intensity. Maybe this was the difference: the fact that he cared, which is so unlike my past experiences that I'm not sure how to process it. Once I recover, I return the favor, touching him until he shudders and lets out this low moan, like he's trying not to be too loud, even though we're alone in the dark out here. I want to bottle up that sound. Make it my ringtone. Learn it on the harp.

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For long, lazy minutes, all we do is kiss. Slow, slow, fast. Slow, slow, fast. Building our own rhythm. His hands on my back and on my hips and then sliding down my thighs, like there is not enough of me for him to touch.

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He pulls me to him and just holds me for several long moments. Eventually, his hands drift up the back of my shirt, pausing when they reach the strap of my bra. I break away from him for a moment to pull off my shirt, giving him easier access. When he sheds his shirt and jeans, I have to will my heart to slow down. He is lovely, all that deep tan skin and the dips of his muscles. He closes his eyes and I run a hand down his chest, placing his hand on top of mine. "I'm going to say something, and you have to promise not to get mad at me," he says. "No way. I reserve the right to get made at anything you say." He lifts my hand to his mouth, kisses the inside of my wrist. "Fine, I shall risk your wrath." A deep breath, and then: "I really, really like you."

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"This is such a dumb thing to ask, but now I have to know. What do you even like about me?" "This is a difficult question to answer when we're half naked, but I'll do my best." He backs up on the bed, putting some space between us, but he reaches for one of my hands and starts ticking items off using my fingers. "Okay. Things I like about Quinn Berkowitz. You have a fantastic sense of humor. I can open up to you in a way I haven't been able to with anyone else. You care about your family, which is why it's been so difficult for you to decide what to do about B + B. You're brave, even if you think you're not. And..." A flick of one eyebrow. "you're sexy as hell."

RIP me. I don't know how to react except to push him deeper into the bed.

I kiss him everywhere, the places he used to think were ugly, the skin he wanted to hide. We lose the rest of our clothes and his mouth moves down my chest slowly, slowly. It's agony. Eventually, he reaches my waist, my navel – and keeps going. "Is this okay?" he whispers, pressing a kiss to one hip bone and then the other. "Yes." My voice is featherlight. "But I – I haven't done this before."

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"I haven't either." The words are low and breathy, and they do nothing to ease my wanting. "We could figure it out together?" The figuring it out is strange at first. Then a little less strange, warm and shimmering and yes, my hands in his hair and his name on my tongue. And then just... bliss. Utter bliss. When I pull him back up to me to kiss him, it feels different. Heavier. Maybe because we're alone, maybe because that was new for both of us and by far the most intimate thing I've ever done. He drops his lips to my neck. "Quinn," he says into my skin, a little growl that sounds like both an invitation and a question. Just like that, I'm ready again. "Do you have a condom?" He nods. "Are you sure?" "Very. Are you?" "I don't think I'm doing a terribly good job hiding my enthusiasm," he says, muffling a laugh into my neck as he grows more enthusiastic against my leg, "but yes." I have to laugh at that too, because laughing is okay, because why can't this be funny and hot and sweet and probably even a little weird all at the same time? Why did I ever think it had to be only one thing and that I'd done it so wrong? It's all of those things and more, and as soon as it's over – for both of us – I miss the heat of him. With the sheets around our hips, we talk and we laugh and we listen to the rain taptaptap at my tower window. Our stormy summer soundtrack.

We Ship It by Lauren Kay

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Jules turned her head so that she was facing me. "So, did you and Sebastian . . ." Her voice trailed off, replaced by excessive eyebrow wriggling.

"Did we what?" I couldn't stop myself from looking around again, just in case anyone could hear us.

"You know," Jules said, her eyebrows still dancing. "DO it. Do IT! Did you do it???"

"Jules!" I felt my already sun-flushed face become an even deeper shade of red. "We just met! Of course not."

"What's wrong with having sex with someone you just met?" Jules's normally sunny face had darkened. "It's not the 1950s, you know."

I could tell I had offended Jules, so I quickly tried to backtrack. "No, no, I just meant . . . there's nothing wrong with that. It's just, I've only ever kissed two other guys before. So I'm not really . . . I mean, I wouldn't even know . . ."

"Relax," Jules said, reaching over and shoving my shoulder lightly. "I'm just messing with you. Anyway, there are so many things you can do aside from sex. Do you know how to give a good blow job?"

"JULES!" I looked around once again and then dropped my voice to a whisper shout. "Our *moms* are in the other room."

Jules just shook her head and smiled. "Exactly. The *other* room. And so what? My mom knows I have sex. She doesn't care."

I scoffed. "Well, our moms are *very* different. And anyway, Sebastian and I haven't even kissed. He already told me he's not into me, so . . ." But there was a part of me that wanted Jules to tell me I was wrong.

"Well, that's a big fat lie," Jules said with a laugh. "His thing goes"—she raised her arm and stuck her pointer finger

straight up in the air—"as soon as you enter the tub."

"Jules!" I was mortified, but also—I had no clue about any of these things. Jules was the one with experience, not me. And if she thought he liked me . . . maybe he did.

Just then, the door opened, and two *male* masseuses walked in. "Let's maybe finish this conversation another time?" I asked, not wanting Jules to mortify me in front of two strangers.

"Mm-hmm," Jules said as the first masseuse began placing hot stones on her back. "Now it's time to relax."

"And Liv, I hate to admit it, but—your parents are *hot*."

I rolled my eyes. "They are not."

"They are definitely PWFs."

"I don't even want to know what that means."

"Parents Who Fuck," Jules spelled out, blatantly ignoring

my request. "I mean, you don't just *happen* to get pregnant at forty. My friend's parents had an actual schedule on their refrigerator—" Jules was slurring now. "Schexadal. Sex—schedule! They did it all the time! And they *still* didn't get pregnant. So to end up pregnant with not just one but *two* babies—"

"Jules, the amount of sex you have does not share any correlation with the number of functional fetuses." Or was it fetii? Because it was radii, not radiuses . . .

"Livvy, enough with your sciencey science. Your parents. Are Hot. And have sex. Speaking of which, you know who else is hot and should have sex?"

I shook my head no, but I already knew the answer.

"You and Sebastian!" Jules raised an eyebrow. "You couldn't stop smiling around him, even if you tried!"

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screw things up with Sebastian or do things wrong. I wanted him to like me; I wanted him to more than like me. "What was your first time like?" I asked.

"Oh, awful. Truly, truly terrible. In the back of a Jeep with Jeff Findley. The condom broke and everything."

"Oh no! Did you get pregnant?"

Jules burst out laughing. "Of course not! I took Plan B and I was fine. But we both hadn't had sex before. Neither of us knew what we were doing, and it was just an awkward naked tango. I didn't even really like him that much; I just wanted to get it over with."

"So . . . what should I know, so that I'm not like . . . bad?" I gulped and lowered my voice. "In bed."

Jules then gave me the most extensively detailed sex ed I'd ever heard. All they taught in school was about every STD to avoid; no one ever talked about the stuff Jules was explaining to me.

"I think the hardest part of this all is—ugh, I hate to say it—but *sometimes*, not always—sex stuff does make you get attached. There are definitely chemicals released—I mean, you

and all of your doctory knowledge would know this better than me—but . . . yeah."

"What's it like with Ash?" I asked.

"Well, it's definitely different from when I hooked up with cis boys. But in general, with anyone, it's just like—you've gotta talk about it beforehand, and check in during, and then I always like having a postmortem check-in after, to see what they liked and didn't. Because sometimes in the heat of the moment it can be harder to communicate all that stuff."

I had never realized sex was so . . . complicated. I wished I had a pen and paper with me. I was frantically taking mental notes, but a notebook would have really come in handy. What if I did everything wrong and Sebastian never wanted to see me again?

"Girls, what are we gabbing about? I want a lowdown on all of the cruise 'ships'!" I jumped when Cindy reappeared. She grabbed the hat off Jules's head and plopped down practically on top of Jules. "Scooch, make room for your momma!"

I raised my eyebrows at Jules, terrified she was about to

When the World Tips Over

Jandy Nelson

PART 1

Lizard thought romance novels were totally useless, but Dizzy learned so much from them. She wanted the door of her wild femininity to swing open already, her fiery furnace to ignite, her passion-moistened depths to awaken, and, although, unlike Samantha Brookswether, she'd never seen a real live penis, from these books she knew an absolute ton about stiff members, turgid shafts, and throbbing spears.

She was going to die before she fell in love and merged souls like Samantha Brookswether and Jericho Blane. Before she rose up to meet someone's urgent thrust or was burnt to cinders from the frenzy of simultaneous eruptions or any of the other epic sex stuff in *Live Forever Now*. Worse, she was going to die before she ever even had an orgasm on her own – she couldn't figure it out or was malformed; she wasn't sure which.

She did have a couple things in her arsenal that could start a conversation with a rock. "You won't believe this, Miles, but there's a woman in Pennsylvania who has orgasms from brushing her teeth." This was from a site she found last night while trying to figure out what she was doing wrong with the whole masturbating thing.

...Voila. There above the sauvignon blanc vineyard were the kissing ghosts. Two glimmering older men, one dark, one fair, flickering in and out of the morning light. These ghosts were in love and whenever they kissed, they rose into the air.

Dizzy had long suspected the ghost with dark hair was her great-grandfather Alonso Fall because he looked like the statue on the town square. The only thing was, the plaque on the statue said Alonso Fall had been married to a woman, so Dizzy didn't understand why he was always kissing this other guy in his afterlife.

"Dizzy!" Her mother said her name like this often, like it was an expletive.

Takes a queen to know a queen, Sandro quipped. Miles laughed. Sandro had known Miles was gay since Miles knew, which was pretty much always, though nothing exciting had ever happened about it outside the privacy of Miles's mind until a few months ago when a cook at The Blue Spoonful followed Miles into the walk-in refrigerator at a restaurant party his mother made him go to and kissed him until his mind reconfigured into a bonfire.

Until that moment, Miles's religion had been imagining boys lying beside him, imagining boys walking beside him, imagining boys running beside him, imagining boys naked, imagining boys clothed, imagining boys who imagine boys who imagine boys, and then suddenly there was a way better religion: making out with a boy in a restaurant refrigerator in secret in a hurry.

Even though Miles never felt at ease with anyone, not truly, he had certain ideas about love because he'd been devouring his mother's stash of romance novels since he was ten, particularly *Live Forever*

Now, which he secretly reread every few months. He wanted to drown in love like Samantha Brookswether. Really, he wanted to *be* Samantha Brookswether.

Miles' heart pounded through to his fingers as he turned around, his hands damp despite the chill, his breathing quick, his erection straining. He smelled alcohol on the guy's breath as he approached Miles (the scent familiar from his uncle, his brother). He heard the words: *beautiful boy* (normally words Miles would've unheard immediately, but here now they were flying embers) and then it happened: the collision of their mouths, this guy's skin so much rougher than the handful of girls he'd kissed in his life, sending currents of yes to his heart, to his head, to his groin, to his former self and to his future one, until they were interrupted by the expediter, a guy named Pete with tattoo sleeves who said, "What the hell? Hands off or I'll tell his mother and you'll be out of a job, Nico."

Miles hadn't known how to make it happen with Nico again – he couldn't find him online – so he wandered into the restaurant after school daily and stared at the guy like it was an Olympic sport.

Another walk-in encounter never happened, and soon after, Nico was fired for drinking on the job, but that was the kiss that changed everything. Meaning: The Season of Porn – Miles not only devouring it whole but stopping and starting, rewinding and replaying, again and again, trying to figure it all out.

Meaning: He couldn't get through a run in the woods without ducking behind trees, his hands plunging into his shorts as he dive-bombed into all that would've could've should've happened in that refrigerator, had expediter Pete not barged in.

Meaning: He felt guilty all the time of some unspecified crime, and like he was lying even when he wasn't. Meaning: He feared that instead of saying "Please pass the salt," or "Nice race, dude," he might, by accident, say "I'm gay. I mean, super-gay. Like you have no idea how gay."

Meaning: the dating app Lookn. (More on this later.)

Meaning: He began studying other boys like he was an anthropologist. This was how close they stood to each other. This was when they said "yo" or "bro." This was the pitch they laughed and talked at. This was what they did with their faces instead of swooning like Samanth Brookswether.

Hey, did you know women have orgasms from brushing their teeth? Human dude, are you high? That is redonkulous, a soup sandwich, shit-bat mad whack, insane in the membrane.

The only one he talked to about literature was Hot AP English Teacher Mr. Gelman. (And it was hard to pay attention because Miles was always imagining him naked, etc. Lots and lots of etcetera.)

"And two weeks ago, he left me for dead in a Dumpster. I woke up in total darkness covered in vomit and garbage. I thought I was in a coffin at first. There were rats everywhere. The smell – it was – " Oh man, he was there again, in the terror. Blood rushed to his cheeks. He hadn't intended to tell her this! He hadn't intended to ever tell anyone this.

"Didn't he look sad, Bettina?" She squeezed Miles's arm, didn't let go of it. Girls often invaded his space like this, assuming he was straight, like they had a right to touch him. "But we got you now," she exclaimed, then whooped about nothing as far as Miles could tell, before swigging from a bottle. She turned toward him and before Miles knew what was happening, her lips were on his and the liquid in her

mouth was dribbling into his. Um" Gross. He pulled away and spit the liquid out in a spray, then started apologizing and trying to wipe it off her shoulder and the dashboard.

"Perfect Miles doesn't drink," Wynton said. "Perfect Miles is no fun."

It was true. Perfect Miles didn't drink and was no fun. He hated Perfect Miles. Fuck it, Miles thought, and took the bottle of tequila from the girl and chugged. "Wait," the girl said. "Not like that!" He felt his face pruning and puckering in rebellion, but he got the alcohol down. She took the bottle from him, said, "You want to sip tequila, like tea." She demonstrated, pinkie out, then handed it back to him. "I'm Madison." "Bettina," the other girl said.

"I'm Perfect Miles," Miles said, and they all laughed. Even Wynton. Miles couldn't believe he'd made Wynton laugh. He peered around Bettina to make sure Wynton wasn't ridiculing him, picking Miles off the sole of his shoe like usual. But no. Miles had legit made his brother laugh. This was a first and it lifted him. The tequila was warming him too, uncoiling him, making him feel better, livelier. Miles and Madison passed the bottle back and forth.

"Now one of these," Madison said, popping something into Miles's mouth. At first he thought it was a breath mint because he was that dumb. He bit into it, expecting peppermint, but bitterness filled his mouth, aspirin maybe, he thought stupidly. He should've spit it out, but not thinking and wanting the bitterness gone, he took a swig off the bottle and swallowed it.

These were the last things Miles remembered clearly, well, fairly clearly, from that night:

- 1) Busting through the door of a party with Wynton's arm around him like they were best friends. Wynton introducing him to everyone, saying, "This is my little brother Miles! This is my little brother Miles!" *His little brother Miles*. Wynton had never called him that before. Not once. He remembered feeling effervescent, mighty, elated, all new to him. (Maybe this was the drug.)
- 2) Trying not to gag as beer funneled down his throat through a beer bong.
- 3) Jumping up and down in what felt like slow motion on a crowded sweaty dance floor with Wynton, Madison, and Bettina, all of them – including him! – shouting to each other, "I love you guys so much!"
- 4) Sitting on a bed as Madison undid his jeans, then Madison on top of him, swarming him like an octopus, then Madison actually turning into an octopus.

Then nothing nothing nothing nothing. Until he woke covered in vomit and slime in the rank, rat-infested Dumpster in an alley in the center of town with his jeans half-buttoned, his shirt on inside out. So. Yeah. He'd blacked out and Wynton had thrown him away. Literally. And Miles probably had sex with a girl for the first time (but couldn't remember any of it) before he'd ever even had sex with a boy.

Without any self-consciousness, she slipped her t-shirt over her head, then half hopped to pull off her daisy jeans, until she was in a blue lace bra and tight green underwear. She was amazing head to toe. He watched her walk to the edge of the massive blue pool, thinking she looked like Venus in the Botticelli print on the wall in the bathroom at The Blue Spoonful, thinking also that he wasn't feeling it, not in *that* way, not at all, nothing, rien du tout, rien de rien. And if he ever was going to feel it for a girl, it would be now, here, with her.

He was still kicked out of the house which was a bummer because his sort-of girlfriend Chelsea also kicked him out because he'd accidentally fooled around with her hot roommate Bettina and then his best friend Max kicked him out because he found out about hot roommate Bettina, who happened to be Max's hot fiancée Bettina. Yeah. He was a dumb prick. Chelsea had called him a human wrecking ball, which had made him prouder than it probably should have. He also thought it'd be a good name for a band. He tried not to be a dick in life, he really did, but he never got very far with it.

"I need your help, blue buddy." Like he always did. Then he shook a pill from the container he'd swiped, broke it in half, and popped it into his mouth, swallowing it with his saliva.

...his gaze smacked into Dawn someone he knew from somewhere, whose hair was long and light, like straw, whose eyes were green, whose fingers kept running under the hem of her short yellow skirt. And then she was right there, standing beside him, and her hair smelled like candy, and the next thing he knew, he was in some back room with her and her long bare legs were so long and bare and the two of them were laughing, Dawn someone from somewhere saying he was as crazy as everyone said and he hollered, "I am a crazy man!" and she laughed and he inched up her skirt and his fingers were unsnapping her bra and her hands were on his arms, his neck, and music was cracking open his head – orchestral music, God he was so high, whoa, maybe too high, he couldn't remember how many of Miles's pills he'd taken either, four? Four thousand? And there were legs wrapped around him and he was in love in love in love even if he kept forgetting who he was with, still he could feel it, could feel love banging around in his chest, against his ribs trying to get out, banging so hard, so loud, no not love it was life, life mic-ed up and blasting inside him, amped to the max, and they were both sweating so much because: heatwave, tidal wave, slippery as seals they were, and Dawn was saying in his ear how amazing he played, and how amazing it was that he cried when he played and how amazing how amazing how amazing how amazing and that it made her feel so much and she wanted to feel so much and he did too, that's all he wanted, to feel so much and they were, they were feeling so much, they were so much, and then it was over. And he was alone.

He touched his face, okay, he was still there, but ouch, and why were his fingers wet? He put his hands to his mouth, tasted metal, blood, because oh yeah, that guy had punched him, kicked him in the ribs too, oh right, that was why he'd left. He'd been in the alley behind the bar. He could see himself on the ground now like it was a movie, curled on the pavement like a dirty rind getting kicked again and again. How was he supposed to remember he knew Dawn someone from somewhere because she was the girlfriend of that neckless Brian Fuckmutt from juvie? He took a swig of the bottle he'd swiped – what was it? Gin maybe? Who cared? He was at the point in the night when the alcohol began drinking him.

PART 2

Then she added that she'd stop surfing the web for pertinent information regarding existence and stop being superficial and hating beautiful people and stop reading romance novels and stop trying to learn how to masturbate correctly and stop swearing and stop wishing she were someone else and then she'd gotten desperate, and before she knew it, she was promising she'd become a nun.

"Probably a stupid dick weasel," I grumble. "A fuck trumpet, cock-nose, arse badger."

One time last year, I followed her and watched as she and a Jesus Impersonator got into another RV. I skulked under the window until I heard sex noises loud and clear (which I was familiar with from the

movies), then ran back to Sadie in horror. She must've known I'd followed her, because the next morning, we had a cringe-y talk about how sex was part of her spirituality, "Plus," she said, "it's important the vag doesn't get all closed up with cobwebs," which I believed was a thing that could happen until she caught me contorted in my bunk recently. "Doing a self-exam?" she asked. "Checking for cobwebs," I said seriously. She shrieked with laughter. "Oh Cassidy, you take everything so literally!"

"Okay, sorry, I was a fuck trumpet," Mom says now, reaching her hand through the window of Sadie to touch my arm, but I'm still not ready to forgive her, so I don't laugh even though I was to because she never swears.

A major dick weasel, I think.

It's a movie and Mom is being played by an actress that has a startling resemblance to her. This role she's playing is so... I don't know what... so *her* is all I can think. Uber her. Now they've left the campsite and they're on their backs looking up at the waterfall. And then she's stripping, and while he's still taking off his clothes, she rushes into the falls in her underwear. He follows and then they're screaming into the falls at the top of their lungs, which is our thing.

I leap down, not using the ladder – against the rules – landing on my ankle, fell the twinge of a twist, don't care, then bust out of Sadie and am relieved that Mom's dead body isn't by the embers still smoking in the fire pit (we see our share of gory horror movies), then I head over to Dave's RV, I'm about to knock when I hear sex noises.

I cover my ears and go to the outside table, count the cigarettes Dave smoked last night: twelve. The bottle that says *Wild Turkey* is half-empty. Mom hates drinking too, but not when Dick Weasel Cock-Nose Dave does it, apparently. Even with my ears covered I can still hear the sex noises, so I take my hands off my ears and repeat: gross, gross, gross, gross, gross as I stomp around camp like Rumpelstiltskin.

When the disgusting noises finally stop, I bang on the door as hard as I can. I want to break it down. (Ire, n. intense anger; wrath.) Mom opens it in Dave's red plaid shirt from last night. It's misbuttoned. She's misbuttoned. She looks like she's been tumbling in a dryer.

You want to ask what your weekly chess partner Dave Caputo is doing in Cassidy's story – having sex with Cassidy's mother! – but of course you can't

One afternoon, I see him standing at the base of the waterfall looking up. "Shut off the faucet already, you cockbite!" he screams. I run to him, and he takes my hand, and I repeat, "Shut off the faucet already, you cockbite!" And we keep yelling that until I think I'm going to pee in my pants from laughing and calling God a cockbite so many times in a row.

"Like what's supposed to happen before you die," Dave tells us one night between courses at his restaurant. "I saw it all and god sick, literally sick, nauseated, and dizzy, thought I was going to pass out. It was my father's life with me cast in the leading role that I saw, and I didn't want it. Pitch meetings with assholes. Drinks with assholes. Being cooped up with assholes in an office in a high-rise full of more assholes. No. For. Me. I wanted to be free of my dad. He's – let's just say, he's difficult. No, let's just say impossible. No, let's just say he's an asshole. No, he's the King of the Assholes. King Asshole. So, I hit

it." I can't believe how many times he's saying *asshole*! Saying it like it's the most delicious word, making me want to say *asshole* too.

PART 3

Diego de Falla was light-haired and dark-tempered, a squat, unpleasant man who moved like a spider in fast bursts at odd angles. He had a black heart and no one like him. No one. Not Alonso's mother, Sofia. Not the prostitute Luciana Magdalena, whom he paid to wash his feet before the act.

This was the root of Diego's misery: the odor of his wife. For Sofia carried another man's scent on her, even after that other man had sailed off for the America's, even after the reports that the other man had died at sea. "How can it be?" Diego would ask his odious reflection in the mirror, in the pond, in his knife at the dinner table. How can a dead man's smell fasten itself to a living woman? This *his* living woman? And not just any man, but that ridiculous penniless poet Esteban with his ridiculous chiseled face, his ridiculous cascading brown locks, his ridiculous tree-like height. And why oh why did the ridiculous man's ridiculous scent have to be so wonderful? Diego couldn't get away from it. He'd open a drawer for a pair of socks and there it would be – *so painfully delicious* – wafting out and nearly knocking him over. At night, he would pace from room to room, trying to escape it, often ending up at a window sucking in air from outside like a drowning man reaching the surface.

But Alonso's birth was more than Diego could bear. He'd known the moment he laid eyes on the boy with his ridiculous chiseled features. Another man's son was in his house.

"No matter how hard you try, Alonso," he said, "you will never be my son." Then he dropped the boy on his face. Alonso didn't get up for weeks and when he did, he had a scar from cheek to chin.

Diego brought Hector home when Alonso was nine years old. Hector was a beetle of a boy, close to Alonso's age, a little human gargoyle and miniature version of Diego, with a note on his vest that said: *I am Hector, the sone of Diego de Falla. My mother can't take care of me anymore.* It was signed: *Luciana Magdalena.*

Miles sailed through the hospital lobby en route to what was likely another terrible decision. His first internet hookup. He kept his head down so as not to have to talk to anyone and pretend to feel all the appropriate things he wasn't feeling about Wynton's condition and hide all the awful, inappropriate things he was.

Um. What the fuck? Did he just say Miles *glowed*?

When he couldn't take it anymore, he'd escape to a nearby supply closet, where he counted the 1,394 tiles on the floor or watched porn on his phone, particularly one video where two burly bears made out ferociously while doing it, like two Jericho Blanes from *Live Forever Now*. Yeah. But it was better than thinking about suffocating his brother with a pillow (yes, this occurred to him one fleeting moment) or shaking him awake only to say: *I still hate you.*

"Miles!" A girl's voice interrupted his thoughts. He turned and saw Madison from the left-for-dead-in-a-Dumpster night rushing toward him. His stomach lurched.

Oh, man, why couldn't he remember what they'd done together? Had they gone all the way? Did they use a condom? What if she was pregnant?

What. The. Actual. Fuck.

His phone dinged. *Hear!* the message said. Lord. The guy couldn't spell. This morning in the supply closet he'd opened the app Lookn and uploaded a photo, then swiped right on this guy Rod, who in pics looked like Hot AP English Teacher Mr. Gelman. Rod was nineteen (or said he was), on his way to Oregon, and was stopping Paradise Springs for a bite. *Of you maybe*, he'd joked in the message to Miles. Hardy har har.

This wasn't the first time Miles had opened Lookn. After being indoctrinated into the religion of kissing a boy in a hurry in a restaurant refrigerator, Miles had downloaded Lookn, an app that wasn't connect to other social media, so he could easily sign on saying he was eighteen. He'd uploaded a photo of someone else, made a skeleton profile, then spent hours, then weeks, ignoring messages and swiping through guys until his eyes were bleary, until his room was full of these phantoms: the short hot guy who like rugby sitting in his desk chair, this skinny redhead into musicals splayed on the bed, the hefty guy who loved to eat Mexican food lying on his side on the floor, the surfer standing by the window. It was a little like reading a novel that had doors so the characters could get out and join you.

At first, he searched for the refrigerator-kiss guy Nico, then he didn't know whom or what he was searching for, just that he couldn't stop swiping, imagining, pulling guy after guy out of his phone and into his room to keep him company. The men were mostly that: men, and in many of their pics, naked or half-naked. Their bodies fascinated frightened dared aroused obsessed Miles with their smooth jacked chests, their hairy sunken ones, their lanky frames and squat ones, their freckles and moles and moths and eyes. Their dicks and dicks and dicks and dicks and more dicks. (And measurements of said dicks!)

His school wasn't like the ones on TV and in movies with LGBTQ+ centers and Gay/Straight Alliances or whatever. There wasn't one out gay person at his small Catholic school. He did have suspicions about this guy Conner on the track team and once had clumsily tried to investigate but got nowhere. He knew statistically there had to be others like him making out with the wrong people – in his case: girls – under bleachers or in the hallways at dances. And sure, he could be the first to come out. Except Perfect Miles didn't rock the boat. He didn't even get in the boat.

But night after night, back then, he indulged, looking and looking. Some of the guys were nearby too, and a few he knew personally. The assistant track coach at Paradise Springs High. Tony Sanchez, an older guy who owned the hardware store. It was like walking by your neighbor's house and suddenly the walls turned see-through. Miles went to the hardware store the next day after he spotted Tony on the site and lurked in the electrical aisle, spying on the man with his big toothy smile, before finally buying a box of nails.

Back then, he'd been too chicken to actually message anyone on Lookn or post his real picture. But this morning in the supply closet, he'd done it. He just couldn't count the tiles or watch any more Jericho Blane porn or think so many wrong things about his possibly dying brother.

Miles slowed to a fast walk when he saw the guy leaning – posing – against the cab of the truck. He was more manly than in his pic – was he really nineteen?

Miles slowed further. He could see Rod's expression now, a lot of Christmas morning in it on spotting Miles. Miles stopped. Why was he doing this? He didn't know. He just was. He started walking again. Jesus. He was a (secret) criminal now to boot, who needed a psychiatrist and probably was going to get kicked out of school. A criminal whose asshole (comatose!) brother went to jail for him and pulled a girl off of him because he couldn't consent (did Wynton suspect Miles was gay?), acting after seventeen years like he might actually care about Miles. How to deal with any of it?

"Hey," Rod said as Miles approached. "Even better in person. That never happens." Miles was engulfed in aftershave. Rod's hand landed on his shoulder and squeezed it like he was testing a melon. Miles didn't know how to greet him, didn't know what to do with his hands. Should they shake? Bro tap? Oh, too late now. Miles put his hands in his pockets, caught Rod checking him out, down and up. Miles didn't know where to look. Where did people usually look? He settled on the name of the truck: *Kenworth*. This idea had been better in his mind.

Rod whose name was ROD was indeed handsome in the rugged Hot Mr. Gelman-like way. He could ford a river on horseback maybe when he wasn't setting people on fire for his motorcycle gang.

"God on. I don't bite," Rod said. "Well, I do bite, like I said in my message, but only if you want me to." He chuckled in a goofy way.

Miles closed the door, quickly put his hand over his mouth to check his breath. His heart raced. What were the rules anyway? Should he tell him before what he did and didn't want to do? He wasn't ready to try certain things. Not with someone he didn't know. Oh man. What the hell was he doing? And doing it when his brother was in a coma!

"You're really hot," Rod said.

Felix's sunglasses were resting on his head and Miles was once again taken aback by the guy's amazing eyes – the color of wet slate, he thought, no no, oh no, his eyes were *the color of mist* like Jericho effing Blane's! Made even more lethal because of the intensity of Felix's gaze, which was currently x-raying Miles, shifting things around in Miles's stomach, making his neck warm. Could Sandro be right? I mean, did straight guys eyeball gay guys like this? Not at his school, they didn't. He sure didn't want to look away so did precisely that.

Also, how had he not noticed right away how good-looking Felix was – he must've gotten thrown off by the outfit, the mustache, the strangeness of their first encounter. But now, well. Hot Hercules definitely had appeal. This guy looked like he ate three other guys. There was so much of him to imagine naked, which was what Miles was doing. Was it true what they said about foot-size? Because whoa.

"I've never kissed a girl, Alonso," Sebastian said. "You have." Never?" Alonso asked, unsure where this conversation was headed. "I was thinking you could teach me." Alonso's heart stopped beating. "To kiss?" he asked. Truly, Alonso wasn't sure if he was still alive in this moment.

Alonso's legs were trembling so that he couldn't take a step. He sat down in the middle of the road and tried to slow his breathing, his racing heart. He'd known happiness but never like this. He was going to kiss Sebastian! He imagined and imagined exactly how he was going to do it, and what might happen after and after and after that. Then in a giddy fit, he jumped to his feet and ran on wobbly legs as fast as he could muster to the stone house. His blood sang as he climbed up the trellis and into the open

window of Sebastian's room. He sat on Sebastian's bed. His friend was already asleep. Anticipation consumed Alonso, until he couldn't stand it, couldn't stand it, couldn't stand it. He gently touched Sebastian's mouth with his index finger and Sebastian's eyes fluttered open. "I want to teach you to kiss," Alonso said. Moonlight flooded the room, splashing over them. They stared at each other. Alonso could hear both their hearts beating. Sebastian's face was serious. "Okay." When their lips met, the world began to swing and sway. The bright beautiful world. Sebastian never asked Esperanza to the dance.

After that, the boys couldn't keep their hands off each other. They began sneaking into the back room at the bakery, running into the woods, pulling each other behind doors. Even though it occurred to them to hide their new romance, it never occurred to either of them that it was wrong, for nothing had ever felt so right in all their lives. It made Alonso feel holy, holier than he ever had in church. Or anywhere.

Their passion grew and grew. One day, unable to keep it in another moment, Alonso declared his love to Sebastian by using the corresponding colors, for Alonso had a sense-blending condition where words came in colors. It was discovered by his tutor. For him, *I love you* was: *purple green blue*. That became their secret code.

As the trail narrowed and Felix took the lead, Miles began to recast the walk-in kiss with Felix in the starring role. It was Felix now slipping out of the shadows, all six feet seven and a half inches of him, pressing into Miles from behind, his hand on Miles's shoulder. "Can I join you in there?" he'd whisper into Miles's ear, lighting the world on fire. Then the thud of the walk-in door closing them in. Felix pushing Miles against the cold wall, one hand against Miles's chest, the other reaching for Miles's belt, unfastening it, popping the button of Miles's jeans with ease. Miles closed his eyes.

He knew he should say, "You okay?" but he didn't trust himself to speak. Then when Felix rolled onto his back, saying, "Thought I had the little fucker," and cracked up himself, Miles took his hand from his mouth, snorted, and dissolved into laughter.

Felix continued, "Left a note for my parents and little brother, Elvis. Left my phone so they couldn't reach me. Emailed the Culinary Academy, told them I wouldn't be coming for the summer session. He sighed. "Broke up with my girlfriend by text, like a total dick." Miles tried not to let the disappointment at this girlfriend-news register on his face. Felix must've caught it anyway, because he quickly said, "No. I mean, I'm bi, I see guys too." Holy hell! Miles now tried not to pop to his feet and do a jib.

"You are a monster. A lying, hypocritical monster in Gucci jeans in a fucking literal glass house." She's spitting the words at him. "You disgust me."

I, for one, love a big dog, if you know what I mean, Miles.

Stop. He says he's unavailable. But, fuck yeah, definitely know what you mean.

Sascrotch, human dude, Sascrotch.

Don't be bigdickulous, doggo.

Oh no, it's the cockapocalypse.

Cockasaurus-rex.

The baloney pony that broke the dick-ter-scale.

But Felix seemed to want to be friends with Miles and Miles really wanted to be friends with Felix. He'd just have to avoid eye contact, and eye-mouth contact, eye-abs contact, eye-ass contact.

Miles leaned against the desk, eyed the bunk bed, and oh hello perfect scenario: *Sorry, you two are going to have to share a room, only one left.* "Tell me about the trip down with Cassidy," Miles said to distract himself from the X-rated moment beginning to live-stream in his head. The port marathon in the hospital supply closet had surely warped him.

When he raised his head to say so, he saw that Felix was unbuttoning his shirt. Oh no, no, no because: Oh yes. Hot AF Hercules is right. Felix was half-turned toward the window so Miles could watch uninhibitedly as Felix undid the last button and slipped the shirt off one shoulder, then the other. He was broad, lean, and tan, and oh man, with his dark loose tousled hair hanging past his shoulders, not to mention the misty eyes, he really and truly was Jericho Blane. A giant bisexual Jericho Blane! A Jericho Blane who liked guys. He'd won the effing lottery. Except he was unavailable. Deep breath. Just leave the sunglasses on, Miles psychically begged, and as if in response, Felix turned, lifted them, and smiled at Miles. "Whatever should I wear?" he said, throwing up his arms. Ack – and that was adorable. How would he survive a road trip?

He'd been attracted to unavailable, i.e., straight, guys at school, of course, like every one of them, or most of them anyway, his body reacting to, reveling in the smallest most carefree gestures: Conner Foley reaching up to grab his hat in his locker before practice, Hot AP English Teacher Mr. Gelman tilting his head exposing his neck while he read aloud to the class, Rhett Clemens kicking his legs up on his desk like he owned the air. He collected these moments, then relived them safely, constantly, privately when he ran, when he read, when he showered, when he breathed.

Felix's shades were up again and his absolutely gorgeous eyes – let's just be honest – were gazing down at Miles sympathetically, causing the blood in Miles's body to switch direction. Was it normal for an unavailable guy to touch an available guy like this? This felt even less platonic than the shoulder tap in the woods. Further, Felix hadn't yet put on the T-shirt, and the tan swath of his stomach was so close, Miles could place the flat of his palm on it, so close he could run his finger under the waistband of Felix's pants, so close he could see the Calvin Klein logo on the briefs. Miles breathed in, smelled sweat. The light in the room was shadowy, the music of the river loud and secluding. They were alone. So alone. This was so much better than being in a restaurant walk-in refrigerator, Miles closed his eyes.

Fuck it. He let himself imagine it all: How he'd stand and place his palms on Felix's stomach, his chest, his arms, feeling the heat of Felix's skin under his hands. He imagined Felix's arms closing around him, the two of them falling back onto the lower bunk, their bodies entwining. Their hands traveling. His heart began to race.

"Sorry, I..." Miles didn't know how to finish the sentence. *Sorry I was in a porn video before while you were just being a nice guy.*

Miles tried to ignore the stranded-with-Felix porn event now rolling in his head.

They drove on in silence until Miles couldn't take it anymore and said, "So what's it like? Do you like girls more than guys or guys more? I don't get it."

Felix kept his eyes on the road. "I went out with girls until my junior year. But that summer, there was this guy on the line at the restaurant where I did prep – older, gay, out, almost tall as me – and he'd look at me and smile way over everyone else's heads and I'd lose my shit. I nearly chopped off all my fingers watching him pull the rib-eyes out of the wood oven."

"How about you?" Felix asked. "How'd you figure it all out?" "First crush. Second-grade teacher, Mr. Quittner."

Then one day, their fortunes changed as fortunes do. A boarder who was renting a room in the uneaten part of the de Falla house began talking to Alonso about an out-law city in California on the west coast of America. It was called San Francisco, or sometimes Sodom by the Sea, the boarder said, chuckling. A place where there were no laws, no rules, where men danced with men and women with women, where men dressed like women and women men, where people did what they pleased, lived any way they wanted.

Alonso wanted to pull gold out of a river and buy a house with it where he and Sebastian could live, floating around together from room to room. He wanted to be somewhere lawless where men danced with men.

"I made this andouille sausage this morning. I have a way with sausage, if I do say so myself."

A way with sausage! Omg, lol, roflmao, as you young humans say.

Miles laughed out loud this time. "What?" said Dizzy. "Don't pay attention to Miles," Felix said, guiding a forkful of food into her mouth. "His mind's in the gutter."

Felix said, "They say food tastes exponentially better if someone else feeds it to you." He speared another piece of sausage. "Now you," he said to Miles. Was Miles imagining it or did he say *Now you* in a provocative way? A sexual way? Felix drew one of the camping lanterns closer, then worked for some time designing the perfect bite. "Bon appetit, Miles," Felix said, and Miles parted his lips, feeling ridiculous, vulnerable, and turned on all at once. Their eyes met, held. Felix lowered the fork, resting it on Miles's bottom lip for a second before tipping the forkful onto Miles's tongue. Miles closed his eyes as Felix slipped the fork out of his mouth, as flavor burst on the roof of his mouth, filling his whole head. "Holy God," Miles said. "Really makes you taste each and every spice, doesn't it?" Felix said. His eyes were still on Miles's mouth and that was making Miles feel breathless. He licked his bottom lip. Felix swallowed. Was he imagining this? He wanted to holler, "ARE YOU SUDDENTLY AVAILABLE?"

"I told him the most amazing thing the morning before Wynton's accident, and he didn't even look up from his book." "What'd you tell him?" Felix asked. Miles watched the fork rise to Felix's mouth, to Felix's mouth, to Felix's mouth. "About this woman who has orgasms from brushing her teeth." Good, Miles thought, let's all talk about orgasms. Perfect.

"What was the mind-expanding experience that happened at the hot springs?" "I had a threesome in the mineral pool one night. It lasted approximately thirty seconds." This turned Miles into a human spark plug. He had to know the gender ratio of this threesome immediately, but he couldn't bring himself to ask. He was bi, so it could be any combination. It was probably with two girls. Two friends who thought he was hot. Naked friends. Didn't he say no one wore clothes at this place? Oh, he had to find out if it was two girls or a guy and a girl or two guys (!), how he wanted it to be two guys, but he waited too long, because Felix said, "Night dude."

Maria said nothing when Alonso took off for the city, coming home reeking of alcohol, tobacco, men, reeking of disappointment and desperation for Sebastian. Alonso said nothing when Maria rode in before dawn and snuck into the house wearing the same clothes as the day before, said nothing when he saw her sneaking into or out of the barn with a certain female ranch hand named Rebecca or a male one named Sal.

One cool evening, after a long day of work, when Alonso and Maria were sitting on the porch sipping wine and eating olives, Maria said, "I want a baby and I want you to be the father." "Me?" "Who else? The other men I see are...I don't know. One becomes the next. Same with the women. I'm not built for long-term romance. But, you are my long-term unromanced, my dearest friend, my family." "I don't know if...I've never..." "I do know. Look out at the oak tree. I'm always imagining a boy on a swing." "A boy?" She nodded. "We will call him Sebastian Junior."

Alonso smiled. He liked thinking of a son called Sebastian Jr. The idea steeped in his mind those next days, altering its very color like tea in hot water. A child for whom he could be as different a father from Diego as possible.

Alonso and Maria were twenty-six years old, when, for the first time since they crossed the ocean, they shared the same bed for several nights in a row and, less than a year later, Sebastian Jr. was born with a full head of bright red locks, like his mother.

Could it be? Alonso rose so quickly, he knocked over his chair. He did not think a thought, but began to run and with each step Alonso's light shone brighter. He'd thought he'd been alive all these years without Sebastian only to realize in this moment he'd been a dead man for over fifteen years. Sebastian saw this sun in clothes running toward him, and because his feet had stayed firmly planted on the ground since Alonso left, he'd long ago stopped weighting his boots or placing rocks in his pockets. He began to rise into the air. "Hurry!" Sebastian cried. Alonso made it to him in time to catch his foot and rise with him into the sky. "You look like a wild man," Sebastian said to Alonso on their way up. "It's a wild land," Alonso said. "You look like you, Sebastian. Maybe sadder." They kissed for a fortnight tucked away in a corner of the sky before Sebastian was able to calm down enough to lower them to the ground.

"Come Sebastian," Alonso said. "I will show you our room." Many years before, Alonso had painted the walls of his bedroom purple, green, and blue stripes specifically for this day he hoped would one day come. Alonso and Sebastian did not come out of their room for a month. Maria left food outside the door for them. Even a spate of earthquakes didn't bring them out. When they were told of them later, they smiled at each other like fools, for they'd assumed the two of them were responsible for the shaking earth.

There'd been moments on the walk to get gas and then the drive to the roadside sandwich shop where they now were, when Miles was certain Felix was adding his own flourishes to the stories. Like, when, with half-grin, gorgeous effing misty-colored Jericho Blane eyes, and mustache twirl, he'd said, "They stayed in bed for a month – no, for one year, Miles. One whole year. And the earthquakes that occurred from their reunion sex could be felt all the way in my home state of Colorado. Further even."

"I'm so happy the kissing ghosts are Alonso and Sebastian!" Dizzy said for the hundredth time that morning. She handed Miles a wrapped sandwich. "I so want to be like Maria Guerrero, don't you? She just does whatever she pleases." "She's the giver of zero fucks," Felix said. "I want to be like Alonso Fall," Miles said as he began unwrapping his sandwich, curious what the chef got him. "You are Alonso Fall, Miles!" Dizzy and Felix both blurted, their voices overlapping. "Except Miles isn't gay," Dizzy said matter-of-factly to Felix. "I am actually," Miles said, the words falling from his lips easy as rain. There was surprise in Dizzy's expression, and excitement, "Really?" "Really." "Oh my God! You are so Alonso Fall. I had no idea you were cool this whole time!"

PART 4

So many of the photographs I have from this time could've gotten Mom arrested for child endangerment. Here's one of me, age thirteen, sitting on the lap of some drugged-out Jesus Impersonator in Purple Rain as he holds my face over a bong, Mom beside us laughing because it's just so funny. And another of me wandering through a house party of wastrels in some skimpy negligee, age thirteen, with an open beer in my hand that someone gave me, my eyes done up like Cleopatra, the rest of my face coated in makeup, because some women thought it would be fun to doll me up and put lingerie on me. Here's one where I'm jumping with a group of tripping adults on a trampoline. AS you can see, I'm about fifteen feet in the air and Mom's nowhere in sight.

When I wake up, there is someone on the bed, pressing into me from behind. Two arms are wrapped around me, and hands are pushing up my shirt, then are inside my shirt, touching my bare stomach, then squeezing my breasts. I gasp, twisting and turning to get away from the rank breath, the insistent grip, trying to find purchase with the coats, the bedclothes, but can't. I can't get away. When I yell out, a hand finds my mouth and clamps over it. I try to bite it, to scream, but the door's closed and the music's loud and he's shushing me and pushing rhythmically into my back, slurring that it's okay because I have my clothes on, and he isn't going to go inside me and because all people have one communal soul. I go limp then, drowning in his body stench and fish breath, drowning in the pounding into my back with his groin, his hand on my mouth, the weight of him burying me in the bed, clenching the coats in my hands as his moaning, shaking, gasping goes on and on and on. After I watch him stumble away, barely able to walk, one hand in his greasy stringy hair, the other ahead of him as if he's bushwhacking, a wet stain on his khaki pants. He thanks me on his way out, which is just so disgusting. I throw up once, again, then panic about the vomit on the coats and frantically flip the whole pile so the soiled ones are hidden on the bottom, all the while thinking how he'd said it was all okay because he kept his pants on and didn't enter me, like I was a house. I still have doodles in one of my school notebooks that I drew after this happened. They're of me with doors in different places on my body. All barricaded. I don't tell my mother. The shame makes it hard for me to speak at all. She doesn't notice. She doesn't notice how many times a day I bathe or how raw and red my skin is from scrubbing. She doesn't notice the weeping at night.

A month after this happens, the night before my fourteenth birthday, I'm coming back at dusk from a computer session where I watched little ducklings getting rescued from a sewage pipe when I see my mother behind the min-mart with a Grizzly Man in a jean jacket. He's pressing her against a wall, and at first, I think she's being pinned against her will, like what happened to me. I start sprinting toward them, except as I get closer, I realize, unlike me, she's an enthusiastic participant. I see way too much. When she stumbles into Purple Rain hours later, I watch her in the ghostly glow of the night-light staggering around wasted, getting a glass of water, missing her mouth with it, then practically falling up the ladder to my bed. I retreat to the far corner of the bunk, not sure if she wants to sleep with me or if she went up the wrong ladder. She smells exactly like The Man in the Coats, the same sour stench and fish breath. "I don't want you in my bed," I say. "Okay," she whispers weakly, and climbs down the ladder. "I don't blame you."

He takes a hit off a vape pen and passes it to me. Despite all the parties I've been to and access to drugs I've had, I've never smoked or vaped week or drank any alcohol except for a sip or two of beer. I bring the pen to my lips and inhale, sucking the vapor deep into my lungs like I've seen others do. It burns my throat and I start coughing and choking – it's awful! – and everyone laughs but not in a mean way. I hand the pen to Cali, who motions for me to sit between her and Surfer Ollie. Cali tells me she's in love

with our rig. "It's purple! So cool!" I tell her its name is Purple Rain and then everyone jumps in saying the names of their rigs: Waldo, Blue Moon, Sweet Potato. Ollie reaches into a cooler and offers me a beer. I look over at Purple Rain, still dark with Mom passed out inside and think: Just following in your footsteps, Marigold, and take the beer. It's so cold, I have to pull my sleeve over my fingers to hold it, the first beer of my life. I'd been avoiding so many groups of kids at the RV parks, worried I'd have to explain why my mother was howling at the moon or having sex with someone's dad, but this conversation is all about where we've been and where we're going next.

It's my birthday and I have friends! No wonder my mother drinks and smokes weed, I think, my head swimming, the girl next to me telling me how annoying her mother is. "Not nearly as annoying as mine, I bet," I say, rolling my eyes like she did, and feeling some combination of wicked and ecstatic at this betrayal, loving this freedom, this camaraderie, this hour free of worry. I realize I'm having fun! You see, Marigold, I am fun, I think. I'm only a sad sack because of you.

"I'm just doing what you do, Marigold." I fill her name with as much ugliness as I can. "Except I didn't take acid or E or peyote or cocaine or whatever else you do to expand your stupid selfish consciousness." Words and words and words coming now. "At least I don't go behind the mini-mart and rut with some gorilla. I saw you! You're disgusting! You're useless! And you're – Do you know I google 'crazy mothers,' do you know that? Because I don't know what to do anymore. Ever. And seriously, Mom – I mean, Marigold – if you really cared about me, you wouldn't take me to parties where men..." Her expression changes. "Where men what? Cassidy?" I'm crying now. "Cassidy?" "What! Nothing, nothing, happened!" I'm shrieking the words. "Nothing happened! Nothing happened! Nothing happened." I can't stop screaming this at her. "Cassidy," she says, taking my shoulder. "Tell me what happened." "Some man, he – It was outside my clothes, so don't worry. It's not like – " "Oh my God. He what? What was outside your clothes? Did someone hurt you? Or make you – Cassidy, tell me. Oh honey, Oh God. No. How come you didn't tell me?"

I look in my rearview mirror, see that he's taking to two naked people, a man and a woman. Naked people who are naked. Naked people in the middle of the road, absolutely positively irrefutably naked. I blink a few times, thinking I've for sure been drugged and am now hallucinating, but when I look again there's more naked people, a whole tribe of naked, some pointing at Purple Rain's tires, all of them facing my way. Naked! What's going on here? "Oh please," I whisper. "Be dreaming, Cassidy."

I open the curtain a crack to see that the naked tribe has members of all different shapes, sizes, and ages. I can't not look. So many penises. I've never seen a penis before; except in an anatomy book. I had no idea it looked like that. And that. And that. And that. So much variation.

Naked Bob is a very large man, which is great because it means I can't see his PENIS (!) under his enormous hairy belly when he comes up to me and says, "Hello! You look younger than an acorn. Can't believe they gave you a license. Well, don't worry, we'll get your rig out of here in no time. Any friend of Dexter's is a friend of mine."

"What happened here?" says a mustached man getting out of the patrol car. He looks around at me, the naked, Dexter. His eyes even track to the boys in the tree. "Who was driving this here RV?" "I was," says Dexter. "Oh yeah? Then who was driving your truck, Dexter?" "I was," says Naked Bob. The police officer looks at Bob. "Like that?" "You got a problem with my God-given attributes, Bruce?"

"Fuck. Off. Both. Of. You. Shitheads," Miles said. "Have a happy life together."

We wrapped our arms around each other in the golden light, in the soft dawn breeze, and even as I kissed Theo, I had a desperate feeling that I wished I were kissing him, that I would never be satisfied, that I could never get enough of him, his mouth, his breath on my neck, his hands in my hair, his sighs and moans as my hands found new parts of him to touch. We whispered crazy senseless things to each other. *I would do anything for you, Bernadette, take a bullet, run down a train, go to war, anything*, he said as his hand pushed up my shirt, as mine trailed across his thigh. And me to him: *You make me feel alive, happy, beautiful, Theo, you're making me feel again, you're making me feel too much*, as he unclasped my bra and I trembled and he trembled, both of us knocking the other out of our senses.

We were entwined on the ground, my shirt and bra strewn to the side, his whole body pressing into mine, chest to chest, stomach to stomach, both of us barely able to go on without exploding from the sheer joy of it when we heard someone clear their throat – Theo jumped off me. I flew into a sitting position, covering myself with my arms. There was Clive staring with no reserve or shyness at my chest even though my breasts were now hidden behind my hands. The hunger in his eyes, the possessiveness in his gaze startled me, unnerved me, and then, as much as I hate to admit it, began to intrigue me, even seduce me. Because in that moment, he was having the same Clive-effect on me he always did, making me want to be bad, to dare the world, coaxing me to do what I wasn't supposed to do but what I secretly wanted to, like take my hands off my breasts, which I then did, ostensible to grab my shirt, but in my heart of hearts, I did it because I wanted Clive to see me too. It was a split-second decision I made. The worst of my life. Because in that moment, wordlessly, somewhat innocently, somewhat not, I revealed that there might be room in my heart in this new way for both of them. Theo's face collapsed. Clive smiled. I'll never forget the look that passed between them. It made me go cold. It still does. As if each was saying to the other: *This time is different. This time we fight to the end.*

"I don't want you," I said, but my voice broke on the *you*. "No?" His hand found my bare waist. My body leaned into his touch of its own accord. My mind felt radioactive. So did my blood. "Are you sure?" he said. "You don't sound sure." "I'm sure." The words were raspy, frayed, "Move my hand away then," he said. "Show me you don't want me." I tried to, I did. "Do it," he said. "Show me you don't want me." I had to move his hand away. Had to. But I couldn't. Instead, I put my hand on his. I knew I had to stop, but I wanted to feel his hand on me for a second. Just one. Then another. Then his other hand was running up my stomach toward my breasts. "Tell me to stop. Tell me you don't want me, Bernadette," he said. I leaned into him. "Tell me." "I can't." It was a moan. "I know," he said in my ear, lighting my whole body on fire, all our lives on fire. I felt his lips, warmer and rougher than Theo's, on my neck, his hands on me, allowing myself this. For. One. More. Moment.

And before I realized it, we were kissing. Before I realized it, we were two furious storms spinning into one, one built for mass destruction.

That day, you both burst through the front door of the white house. You race upstairs to get Mom while he goes to the kitchen. That day, you hear the noises first and then you stand in the doorway long enough to see. Your mother and your uncle naked-wrestling in the bed. They don't see you. You realize they aren't wrestling when they kiss. And kiss. Like they're eating each other's faces. That day, later on, you go to your uncle Clive's house and tell him to stay away from your mother because someone has to tell him this. That day, he's drunk and throws you against a wall and tells you to keep your stupid mouth shut. You keep your stupid mouth shut.

At some point in between our outbursts, he turns to me, looking like a six-year-old and says, "So, guess what? I had my first three-way last night in the hot pool." "Congratulations!" I say, mirroring his

enthusiasm on this as well. This is not an uncommon experience at the hot springs at night, but I don't have the heart to tell him. "It lasted less than a minute." "Um, that blows." I tilt my head. "Or doesn't blow actually." He cracks up. "Right? Worst threesome ever." I'm laughing too and it's like we're already friends. "It was with this mermaid girl and her merman boyfriend." He grins. "They surrounded me. Didn't have a chance...but yeah, so... the dude looked like my best friend Eddie. Like they could be doppelgangers." His tone changes with this reveal – there's longing in it. I look at him. "In love with the bestie?" "A total cliché, I know, why I left Denver." He sighs, doesn't say anything for a bit, then adds, "It wasn't just that. Why I left."

He smiles at me and says, "Who plays a goddamn sonata in a club and makes it sound like rock 'n' roll? Only this guy. This fucking guy. He's joining my band."

PART 5

Miles had to close his eyes because of the full-body shudder, the way it made his breath hitch, his groan come alive. One of those times Felix lifted his shades and their eyes locked. Then Felix's gaze fell to Miles's mouth, his lips, and stayed there. Miles licked his bottom lip and Felix said, "Dude," in this way. They both smiled. Miles's pulse revved. He wasn't the only one feeling it. He wasn't the only one feeling it! Was it Felix's unresolved feelings for Eddie or the diagnosis that had made him say he was unavailable? Or the combination? Miles wasn't sure, but Felix really didn't seem unavailable in this moment. Miles wanted to take the wheel and swerve the truck onto the shoulder of the road. What if he did? Did Felix want him too? He imagined them, the fury of *finally*, two boys colliding like planets. His fingers ached to touch Felix.

Miles didn't want to get out of the truck. His eyes traveled to Felix's chest under his black T-shirt, to his tan muscly arms, to his thighs, to the bulge in his jeans. God, it was unbearable. Desire pounded through him.

Miles wanted to snuggle into Felix too, wanted to do so many things with this guy. "Wait," Felix said. Miles sat up, sparks flying off every thought. Felix was grinning. "Want to – " "Dude, not falling for that again," Miles said. But this time, unlike last night, Felix's hand was sliding up Miles's arm, knocking the breath out of him. Felix grinned and dimpled at Miles and oh my God it was happening. "This time I mean something else." He gripped Miles's arm tighter. The air ignited. "I'm leaving, so I didn't want to... but I'm dying, man. I've been dying. Because the thing is, I haven't told you how it was when I saw *your* face in the hospital lobby. Or saw it when you were laughing in the woods. Or how it's been seeing it every minute over the last two days." His hand slid under the arm of Miles's T-shirt. Miles went weak. "I haven't told you how it is looking at your face right this minute." "How is it?" The words were entirely breath, expectation. "It's like: Who's Eddie, man?" Felix laughed. Miles couldn't believe he could be sitting in this truck and doing backflips at the same time. He was quite certain he was turning into a ball of light, like his great-grandfather. "You put it all in perspective, Miles. I've never felt like this before with anyone. I've been...scared though with everything going on" "I'll be scared with you," Miles said. "I want to do it all with you, Felix."

Miles couldn't wait another second. He was velocity itself, half reeling and all hope, as he slipped his hands beneath Felix's shirt, leaving earth briefly at the sound of Felix sucking in breath as Miles's hands glided across Felix's chest, skin to skin, glided down, down, to his stomach, causing Felix to moan, which caused Miles to completely lose his mind as Felix's hands traveled to Miles's waist, to Miles's waistband,

winding his finger around a belt loop, and then pulling Miles to him by it, making Miles gasp as they each leaned in and, finally, finally, pressed their lips together, stopping time. They breathed in as one, holding this key-to-lock moment, this cyclone-in-a-bottle moment, this connection of bodies and way beyond bodies, Miles on the verge of tears, on the verge of rapture, before the glass broke, the cyclone let loose, their mouths opened, and hunger took over and they were gone, teeth banged, mustache mustaching, tongues desperate, hands everywhere, the sound of Felix's ragged breathing sending hot currents through Miles, making Miles want to say all the words in his pocket pad at once, all the words in all the books in all the world at once – because that would be the only way to describe this, what was happening between them, two boys in a truck falling off the world, falling in love. Miles was splashing around in happiness, and something was unfurling in his chest, something wild and free and deeply irrefutable *him*. As if all the atoms in his body had been spinning at 1,000 mph for billions of years (which they had!) just to get to this moment. What had he been thinking, keeping this most joyful side of himself a secret?

I lost count of all the “fucks” and times the Lord’s name was taken in vain.

Author’s note: Enormous heartfelt appreciation to all the booksellers, librarians, and educators across the country who are so dedicated in these years of terrible book bannings to getting the right books into the hands of young people. You are heroes.

Whiteout by Various Authors

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"I get it," she said, and then she gave me a kiss. "If you can't tell me, I need you to show me. I want to feel it."

She took my hand and placed it on the bare skin beneath her collarbone and the feel of her skin made my mind spin as she shifted my hand lower and lower. Leaving it on her chest—and I didn't dare pull away—she reached for my shirt and began to undo my buttons one by one. I was wearing her favorite short-sleeved pink button-down.

I caught her wrists then. Not that I wanted any of it to

stop . . . it's just that we'd talked about not going too far before we were both absolutely ready. "Are you sure?" I asked, my eyes drifting down to her bare thighs.

Sola nodded. "Yes, I am." And kissed me long and deep. "Are you sure?" she said once she pulled away.

I nodded too. "I am."

Her hands moved to my face, and as she held me there, I took in the way she looked under the blue glow.

"If we were like them"—she motioned at the moon jellyfish floating above us—"I'd float alongside you forever, Stevie. Follow whatever current we find." I pulled her to me and kissed her, slowly leaning back until she was lying on top of me. I really wanted her dress out of the way so I could feel the skin of her torso against mine, but I also didn't want to rush anything. "You okay?" I asked her.

"Always with you."

I rolled her over and put my lips to her throat. She let out a sound that was like nothing I'd ever heard before, and my body responded in kind. After a few seconds of brushing my mouth against the beautiful blue-cast brown of her neck—and

feeling her rapid pulse against my lips—she said, "Hold on." So I respectfully pulled away.

Which is when she sat up, shifted to her knees, and removed her sundress . . .

And I gasped so hard, I almost choked.

She just laughed. It was the most musical sound I'd heard in a long time. "You can come back now," she said.

I didn't hesitate. After sweeping one of her braids away from her face so I could see all of it, I kissed her, then gently licked her full bottom lip before slipping my tongue into her mouth.

She shoved my shirt from my shoulders and reached to unbuckle my belt before working at the button and zipper on my pants.

And I neither flinched nor held back. Her skin felt as electric as the jellies when I ran my hand from her chest down into the curve of her waist and over her hip. As we allowed our bodies to have their way with each other, I hoped she could feel what was in my heart, all the things I couldn't say. The love, the admiration, the respect, the desire. Our mouths and

fingers explored every inch of each other, and in that moment, I resolved to make sure she'd never question how I felt again, no matter how quiet I might get.

A World Worth Saving by Kyle Lukoff

This book was added to the school's e-book library 2/11/2015

This book is available to middle school and up. (not sure about elementary)

From the back cover:

A groundbreaking, action-packed, and ultimately uplifting adventure that intertwines elements of Jewish mythology with an unflinching examination of the impacts of transphobia, from Newbery Honor winner Kyle Lukoff

"Rare and beautiful—a novel that combines wondrous fantasy, searing real-world relevance, and a frank empathetic understanding of the adolescent experience...The way Lukoff combines these elements in a page-turning adventure is nothing short of magic!" —Rick Riordan, author of *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*

Covid lockdown is over, but A's world feels smaller than ever. Coming out as trans didn't exactly go well, and most days, he barely leaves his bedroom, let alone the house. But the low point of A's life isn't online school, missing his bar mitzvah, or the fact that his parents monitor his phone like hawks—it's the weekly Save Our Sons and Daughters meetings his parents all but drag him to.

At SOSAD, A and his friends Sal and Yarrow sit by while their parents deadname them and wring their hands over a nonexistent "transgender craze." After all, sitting in suffocating silence has to be better than getting sent away for "advanced treatment," never to be heard from again.

When Yarrow vanishes after a particularly confrontational meeting, A discovers that SOSAD doesn't just feel soul-sucking...it's run by an actual demon who feeds off the pain and misery of kids like him. And it's not just SOSAD—the entire world is beset by demons dining on what seems like an endless buffet of pain and bigotry.

But how is one trans kid who hasn't even chosen a name supposed to save his friend, let alone the world? And is a world that seems hellbent on rejecting him even worth saving at all?



FORMAT Ebook

LANGUAGE English

AUTHOR **Kyle Lukoff**

AUDIENCE  Juvenile

COPIES 1 available, 1 total

Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass by Meg Medina

Lord's Name in Vain: 27

As: 17

Shit: 7

Hell: 6

Put a (whore): 3

Bitch: 3

Pissy: 1

Cualquiera (slutty nobody): 1

Penis: 1

M.S.

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rumor: "Yaqui Delgado hates you. She says you're stuck-up for somebody who just showed up out of nowhere. And she wants to know who the hell you think you are, shaking your ass the way you do." Darlene lowers her voice. "She even called you a *skank*. Sorry."

I'm stunned.

"I shake my ass?"

Darlene studies her egg-salad sandwich for a second.

"Definitely, yes."

Interesting. I've only had an ass for about six months, and now it seems it has a mind of its own. If only my friend Mitzi were here to see this! Last year in ninth grade at my old school, I was a late bloomer. *Planchadita* — ironed out and hipless — nothing at all like Mitzi, who got her curves in fifth grade.

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girls. I don't see Vanesa, but maybe one of them is Yaqui. Maybe she's watching me right now, staring at my swishy ass, hating me. I hold my books tight and press forward in the crowd, keeping my hips as still as I can.

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SKANK is scribbled in ballpoint pen on my desk. I don't exactly know why my heart starts to thump. It's not like there aren't messages and other handiwork all over this school. Take auditorium seat J-8. I found out during last week's Expectations of Excellence assembly that it's got a faded image of a penis carved on the armrest. No one likes to sit in the Pecker Chair for an assembly. People make fun of you the whole day after that. Ask Rob.

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The super's TV is a hum in the background as Joey explores my mouth. Over the dryer, I can also hear the angry rise and fall of Mr. Halper's voice, surely the start of another argument, but Joey doesn't seem to pay attention to the sound of chairs being dragged, maybe tossed over. Joey runs his lips along my bare neck and nuzzles me like one of the kittens as I take in the smell of his dirty hair. He moves his hands over my bottom until I'm twitchy with need. I don't know how long we lie there kissing, but when he finally starts to slide his chilly hands inside the back of my pants, I push him and sit up, afraid. My mouth is still tingling; I'm dizzy.

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I walk faster, trying to get home as soon as I can, but somewhere deep inside I already know it's too late. They're giggling behind me. Someone tosses a rock. A voice whispers, "Bitch."

Nearly jogging now, I'm close enough to my front yard that I can see the dying edges of Mrs. Boika's rosebushes. But it's no use. All at once, Yaqui rushes up from behind and grabs

a fistful of my hair. She yanks my head back until my feet tangle. Vanesa holds up her phone, recording my face. *Click, click, click*. Someone yanks my jacket right off my back.

Yaqui is a rabid boxer, her fists balled. I tower over her by several inches, but not even my size helps. She's done this before. I kick and try to twist out of her grip, but nothing stops her from toppling me and pressing my face into the pavement. She kicks me hard in the ribs as her friends say, "Ooh," and cover their mouths to laugh.

"Stop! Let me go!" I yell.

I'm fighting with all my might, scraping my nails deep along her arms, but I'm in no-man's-land now. Though Daniel Jones is still in sight, I'm off school grounds and there are no crowds to help, just passersby who stop, point. Only a cop can save me now, and there's none around. Mrs. Boika looks out her kitchen curtains in shock, but she's too scared to move.

Yaqui lifts me from the ground by the hem of my shirt and yanks it straight over my head so I can't see. I kick blindly. The girls are hooting even louder as I fight to keep my arms in the sleeves. She's not going to steal the shirt off my back.

Then the fabric tears, and with a sickening rip, I go hurtling to the ground half naked. I run for my door and pound. My hands are shaking too hard to find my key.

"Let me in, Mrs. Boika! Please!" I scream.

Yaqui lunges again. I can feel the rage in each slap and bite; it's like I'm being devoured alive. Finally, she reaches for my total humiliation. She rips off one of my lacy bra straps and pulls the remaining shreds down around my waist. I'm left huddled in my doorway cupping my hands over my breasts, wearing only my jeans for all of Parsons Boulevard to see. Drivers slow down and crane their necks.

When she's done, Yaqui wraps my shirt around her shoulders like a towel. She's out of breath and glowing. Strands of her hair have come loose around her face, and she wears the bloody scratches with pride. She's victorious — almost beautiful even.

"Want this?" She gives me one final shove and drops something to the pavement. It's my broken elephant necklace, which she grinds into the pavement. "Keep away from Alfredo." Then she walks off with her friends, a slow

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Yaqui Delgado kicked my ass.

Then he stands up and takes my hand.
“Where’s your room?” he asks.

I close my eyes as he pulls me close. Or maybe it’s not me, but this new girl with the pummeled face and the mouth full of lies. Inside my head, I can hear Ma talking about decency. Lila’s words dance there, too. *It’s not a game*. But Joey knows what it’s like to have to coarsen your hide against someone’s punches. Who else can keep me from Yaqui, if only for this day?

He slides me back onto the bed and climbs on top of me. I tell myself that I’m ready for anything, that this lump in my throat is nothing at all. I picture myself in my tight hair and skinny brows.

He takes my face in his hands and kisses each eyelid and my scabbed mouth. He closes his eyes and runs his fingers under my shirt. His touch makes the skin on my arms go to gooseflesh. I don’t stop him from working the buttons of my blouse or the hook on my bra. In a moment, my bruised shoulders are bare. I keep my hands at my sides, too frightened and tired to even move as his lips brush my skin at the top of

my breasts. His hand moves across my ribs, and before I can stop myself, I wince in pain.

Joey opens his eyes.

“What?” he asks.

His face goes dark as my shirt falls away and he sees all that has happened to my body. I’m mottled in purples and greens, tattooed in crusty scabs. I have bumps and swells where they don’t belong.

The corner of his eye twitches, and his mouth turns down as he studies me. After a long minute, he circles the bite marks on my shoulders and chest with his finger, tracing them as though he’s following a road map to a place he doesn’t want to find. He looks pale, and for a second, I swear he’s going to be sick.

“I’m sorry,” I blurt out.

My words are like a hard slap that makes his face contort. I’ve repulsed him completely.

“Don’t say that,” he says, eyes blazing. “Not ever.”

He hands me my shirt and leaves.

You Asked for Perfect by Laura Silverman

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He's silent for a moment, then says, "Sure. No problem." Tension eases from my muscles. "It's not like we're sneaking around doing drugs or having sex."

My cheeks burn. Amir said "sex" so casually. I mean, I guess there's a good chance he's had sex. He dates older guys, which means college guys now. And plenty of people have sex in high school, too.

Even though I want to have sex in the abstract, every time I think about *actually* having it, I go into a panic spiral, which tells me I'm not ready. I mean, I know *how* to put on a condom, but what if it's more difficult than it looks? What size do I buy? And do I buy them, or would Amir? I mean, not Amir. I mean—who would buy them? And how do you know your parents aren't going to show up while you're doing it? And—

Yeah, way too stressful. I'll figure it out in college.

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"And then we had to YouTube how to roll a joint. And how to light a joint. And how to smoke a joint."

Sook laughs. "It was a *lot* of work. Good thing we were fast learners."

I'll never forget that summer. My last months of freedom before high school; though I didn't know what high school would be like at the time. It was also the summer I started figuring out my sexuality.

I'd always been attracted to girls. My first kiss was as clichéd as it comes—a game of spin the bottle in sixth grade, a red-cheeked peck with Cindy Lao in front of twenty of our closest friends. Then in seventh grade, I had my first *real* kiss. It was Ava Newman's bat mitzvah party, and Hailey Bloom and I snuck out of the social hall and down to the east wing of the synagogue and made out for ten minutes in an empty preschool classroom. It was great.

But in eighth grade, I met Ian. He had blue eyes and played bass in orchestra, and my stomach flipped every time I saw him. I tried to brush off my interest as nothing, a silly infatuation. I liked girls, not guys. But the infatuation progressed into a hard-core crush, and one day, I was hanging out with him in the bass room after class, and he kissed me, and I kissed him back. And it was great, too.

It took a lot of processing. I knew bisexuality was a thing, but I guess I wanted it to be simple: straight or gay. Sook, already out as a lesbian, was the first person I confided in. Over that summer, she helped me confirm that yes, I am attracted to girls, and yes, I am attracted to guys, and yes, bisexuality is definitely a thing, and it might be complicated for some people to understand, but it'll get easier.

It's hungrier than our first kiss.

My arms wrap around his back, feeling his broad shoulders. And I draw him close to me. His lips leave mine and run down my jaw and neck before finding my mouth once more. We step back together, then back again, until his legs press against the edge of my bed. *Scheherazade* delves deeper into the first movement. My pulse races to catch up with the tempo.

I pull back for a second, breathing hard.

"You okay?" Amir asks.

My hands tangle with his, like I'm unable to break complete contact. "I'm okay, but uh—" I clear my throat, glancing back at my bed. "I don't want to have sex or anything. I mean, I do, like one day, but I don't want to have sex right now."

"Me neither," Amir says. I exhale. He scratches his neck, self-conscious for a rare moment. "Pants stay on?"

"Pants stay on," I agree.

We both smile.

Then we're kissing again. Then we're on the bed kissing, twisting and pushing closer together. I pull my lips across his skin, against the stubble of his jaw, down his neck, and across his collarbone. Amir shudders beneath me as I accidentally nip the skin.

Too hot. He is actually too hot of a person.

"This okay?" he asks, reaching for the hem of my T-shirt.

"Yeah." I'm a bit breathless as he pulls my shirt off and then his also. I'm overwhelmed by the press of his bare chest against mine.

You Know I'm No Good by Jessie Ann Foley

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By the time the bottle was empty, the heat and dirt and clay of it had settled directly in my head, so that when we had sex on the floor of the wine cellar I moaned dutifully, even though I could barely feel it. Afterward, we split a joint, a king-sized bag of Twizzlers, and a couple benzos Xander had stolen from his mother. Then I walked home by myself, bare-armed in the October rain, too fucked-up to feel the cold, and passed out in

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"most of your followers were old perverts who just liked ogling those pictures of you so you could star in their gross fantasies. Not to sound judgy or anything, but that would make me feel so, like, *violated*."

"Oh, shut up, Madison. One time I was on the train, wearing baggy sweats, no makeup, every *inch* of my body covered, and some fool whipped his dick out at me anyway. There are certain kinds of men, girls our age give them nasty thoughts just by being *alive*. So if you can't control other people's fantasies, why not at least make money off them?"

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"We weren't *seeing* each other."

"Okay. Let's forget about labels. Was this a boy you cared about?"

"No."

"And yet you were intimate with him."

"That's one way of putting it."

"And the other boys—did you care for any of them?"

"Some more than others." I look out the window at the whitewashed landscape. "But at the end of the day . . . no, not really. And they didn't care about me, either."

"So if you didn't care about them, and you don't feel they cared about you—why do you think you kept doing it?"

"I don't know. Because it was fun?"

"You know, Mia, some cognitive psychiatrists believe that humans are often unconsciously drawn to the repetition of painful experiences."

"What are you even talking about? I just told you it was fun. Who said anything about pain?"

"Forgive me. Maybe I'm misunderstanding you. Are you saying the sex with these boys, Xander and the others, was

satisfying?"

"What do you mean *satisfying*?"

"Physically. Emotionally. Did the sex make you feel good?"

"Yeah." I clear my throat. "Definitely. Otherwise why would I bother?"

"Wow. That's great. Especially because it's very unusual for women—especially very young women, like yourself—to experience orgasm with a partner when there's no real intimacy there. And it's nearly *impossible* to experience orgasm when you're under the influence of drugs or alcohol, which you often were, when you engaged in these sex acts. Correct?"

"*Correct*, but that other part you said—that's bullshit."

"What other part?"

"The idea that a girl can't enjoy sex unless she's in love. Unless there are candles and negligees and silk sheets and sensual jazz music playing and shit like that."

"Have you ever given any thought to what *you* like, Mia? What *you* want in a romantic encounter? Because what you

just described—the negligees, the candles—that sounds to me like a cross between a Hallmark movie and a porn film."

Her words summon a memory into my mind. Dillon Keating. LaBagh Woods at the height of summer, mosquitoes buzzing our bodies and my back pressing into the warm soft moss. Far away, the sound of laughter. He'd yanked my underwear down my thighs so fast that it tore in half. *I saw a guy do that in a porn once*, he said. *I didn't think it would actually work*. We both had laughed then, me the loudest, so he knew I was cool with it, that I wasn't scared at all. Black cherry vodka and flat Sprite in plastic cups spilled near our heads and fizzed into the mud. I'd only meant to kiss him.

"You know what?" I say. "I'd rather talk about my dead mother than talk about this."

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their own private soap dispensers, and we all have the option of using them anytime we want. But nobody ever does. That's because if even one girl requests a private stall, then Coach Leslie has to stand outside the shower door to monitor her—and, by default, to monitor all of us. And since we resent any intrusion on our very limited moments of unchaperoned freedom, Red Oak groupthink has decreed that showering in private is a deviant act. If you request a private shower, you're a princess, a diva, a special fucking snowflake. Or you must have gotten your hands on a self-harming tool—the spring of a mechanical pencil, maybe, or the sharp foil edge of an applesauce cup—and now you're trying to hide the damage you've done. Or you're such a horny little freak that your masturbatory habits can't wait until after lights out when you're sure your roommate is sleeping, like a normal person. Regardless of the imagined reason, nobody ever showers in private.

As a result of this situation, I've grown quite familiar with the bodies of my classmates. I know whether nipples are large or small, pink or brown. I know who has stretch marks and

birthmarks and body acne and scars, self-inflicted or otherwise. I know the color and quantity of pubic hair and where each girl is secretly carrying extra weight. I know each roll and muscle, each kiss of thigh and curve of shoulder.

I know Freja's body.

I know the narrow plane of her waist, the round, high ass, the long, smooth back with the single mole directly in the middle, as if, when you pressed it, she might come to life. The breast implants that I didn't know were breast implants until Trinity asked her straight-out and she admitted it. The long, thick hair, so shiny when wet it looks like a cascade of black vinyl.

Today, I've got my eye out for it especially.

"Let she who mocks the bald join the ranks of the hairless," Vera had pronounced after I whispered my plan to her and Trinity as we crossed the quad after yesterday's morning classes. "I like it."

Coach Leslie is always stationed just outside the locker room entrance when we shower, or at least she's supposed to be, but we know that she's addicted to her fantasy league, and

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"Wait," I interrupt. "Statutory rape? But how old was Edgar?"

"Thirty-eight."

"What?"

"Oh, relax, Mia. I've always been mature for my age."

"Yeah, but—"

"I mean, okay, would it have been nicer to meet a boy my own age? Sure. But the boys at my school were all horrible to me, and anyway, what would we even do? Go to fucking prom together?"

She's right: I can't imagine Vera, wild, zitty, furiously beautiful and beautifully furious Vera, with some hairsprayed updo and a satin sweetheart dress, slow-dancing around a

crepe-papered gym to Top 40 with some elderly junkie named Edgar.

"The guy before Edgar was forty-three," she says quietly. "I met him on the A train."

"And the guy before him?"

She pauses. "I don't know. He said twenty-four, but I know he was lying."

"Have you *ever* been with someone your own age?"

"Never. I mean it's probably because . . . or at least Vivian thinks . . . it's because my uncle . . . Well, my uncle. He wasn't a good guy."

Her back is turned to me, and my arm is curled around her skinny frame, so I can't see her face. *Some cognitive psychiatrists believe that humans are often unconsciously drawn to the repetition of painful experiences.*

"Vera. God. Did he—?"

"What, irreparably damage me for life? Apparently. Because I'm here, aren't I?"

"I'm so sorry," I whisper.

"Mary Pat talks about the difference between behaviors

and core issues. Well, you already knew about my behaviors. But now you know my core issue, too. I would have told you before, but it's so . . ." She trails off.

"It's *so* not your fault."

"It started when I was eight, and it didn't stop until I was eleven and finally found the guts to tell my mom. The last few years, I've had to make a decision: either she genuinely didn't know that whole time, which makes her the dumbest mother in the world, or she did know and just didn't do anything about it, which would make her the *worst* mother in the world. I've chosen dumb. It's easier to forgive her that way." She is perfectly still, her voice even and calm, each muscle tensed beneath her skin. "Anyway. It's one of the reasons Vivian gives for why I'm seventeen years old and have made so many terrible decisions. Why I've never even been kissed by someone my own age. Why everything in my life is tainted."

"Not everything. Not this." I hold her in the sleeping bag, a pocket of warmth in the vast cold wilderness, as the snow sifts down from the branches all around us, making the tiniest whispering sounds as the flakes melt on the fire-warmed

sleeping bag. I hold her until her body relaxes, until her hands become hands again and not claws. And then, slowly, she turns to me.

"You're my own age," she whispers.

For once in my life, I know exactly what to do. I put my hands gently on her cheeks, and beneath my palms I can feel the scars and bumps of her pimples, the warmth of her, the long-festering hurt that mirrors my own. As I lean over and kiss her on the lips as gently as I can, I wonder if pain is like an atomic structure. When pain bumps against pain can it create joy? Can it breed love? I hope so. I hope so, so much. Her hair is brittle and sweaty at the same time. Her breath smells like mealy November apples.

"That was nice," she says. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Then she begins to cry.

I wish I was a witch, a *real* Wiccan, not an Ariadne/Bronwynne Wiccan, the real kind; I wish I were a voodoo queen, someone well versed in the dark arts. If I could, I would visit suffering upon Vera's uncle, and then upon Edgar, and the

guy before him, and the guy before him, on all the pimps and dealers, the rapists and manipulators, the thieves and traffickers and stranglers and stalkers and nasty older relatives who have built-in sonar trackers, pain-seeking missiles that home in so expertly and exactly on the girls who are easy targets. But as it is, I'm just a crazy runaway, a troubled teen, a reformed slut, and I have nothing to give but my flawed, threadbare love, the warmth of my body in the absence of the Rule of Six Inches. So that's what I do: I wrap my arms around Vera and let her cry until her breathing settles and her body relaxes, asleep, into mine. In the morning we will reach the highway, and when we get there, we will thumb our way to Minneapolis, find our way to the apartment in Northeast of some girl named Jenya who I've never met before, and then Vera can be the brave one.

Tonight, it's my job.

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gained weight. My stomach is flat but lacking definition. My waist tapers in, then out again. My thighs, covered with downy blond hair, touch. That's a bad thing, I've been told. But then I've been told that some guys like thick. *Are you an ass guy or a tits guy? Do you like dark-skinned girls or light-skinned girls? Tall or short? I hate chicks with short hair. Too black. Too brown. Too pasty white. Too thin-lipped. Too thick-lipped. Too hairy—that's so nasty, girls who don't shave down there. Moles. Cankles. Cellulite. Small-ass titties. Huge tits, but only because she's fat. On a scale of one to ten . . .*

