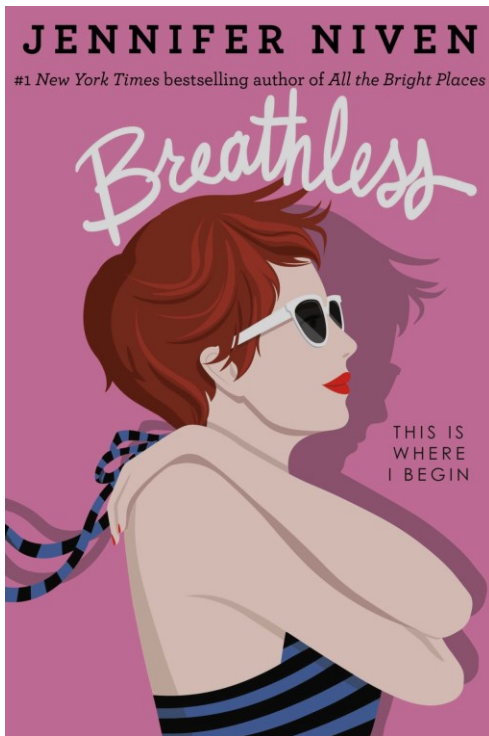


BREATHLESS



Young Adult

By Jennifer Niven

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Book Summary:

A young woman discovers more about herself after circumstances cause her and her mother to leave the comfort of their home.

Summary of Concerns:

This book contains obscene sexual activities; sexual nudity; controversial and social commentary; alternate sexualities; references to suicide; profanity; and alcohol use by minors.

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Not For Minors
BookLooks Review Rating

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ix	<p>You were my first. Not just sex, although that was part of it, but the first to look past everything else into me.</p>
7	<p>And then, to prove to myself and Mr. Russo and everyone else at Mary Grove High that I am an actual living, feeling person, I do something I never do—I kiss him, right there in the school hallway.</p> <p>When we break apart, he leans in and I feel his breath in my ear. “I can’t wait.” And I know he thinks—hopes—we’re going to have sex. The same way he’s been hoping for the past two months that I’ll finally decide my days of being a virgin are over and “give it up to him.”</p> <p>...“Good luck to you, Shane!” Because we both know there’s only one boy in Mary Grove, Ohio, I want my first time to be with, and it isn’t Shane Waller.</p>
8	<p>“Would it be so bad for Shane to be my first?”</p> <p>...“By the way, it doesn’t count as losing your virginity if your hymen doesn’t break. I bled buckets my first time.”</p> <p>“That’s not true,” I say. “Hymens don’t actually break. That’s a big, fat, ignorant myth. Not everyone bleeds, and besides, not everyone has a hymen. Don’t be so heteronormative. Virginity is a bullshit social construct created by the patriarchy.” Saz holds up her hand and I high-five her. As much as I completely, one hundred percent believe this, I’m still desperate to have sex. Like, right now.</p>
9	<p>I stop eating because, sex-obsessed as I am, the idea that you could place a price on virginity is, to put it mildly, insane. I say, “This whole concept is so antiquated. As if all that matters is penis-plus-vagina sex. Something like twenty percent of Americans identify as something other than completely straight, so why are we still so focused on a woman’s first time with a man? And why is a girl’s virginity such a big deal anyway? People don’t get excited about a straight guy having sex. It’s all high fives and ‘Now you’re a man.’ They don’t sit around wringing their hands and searching the internet for replacement parts.”</p> <p>...“And another thing. Have you ever thought about the way people talk about virginity? As if it’s owned by other people? Someone ‘takes it,’ and suddenly it becomes theirs. Like it’s something we give away, something that doesn’t belong to us. She lost it. She gave it up. Popping her cherry. Taking her virginity. Deflowering—”</p> <p>...Alannis Gyalene Catalina Vega-Torres has been having sex since ninth grade.</p>
11	<p>Later that night, I lie in Trent Dugan’s hayloft, underneath Shane Waller, my senses in overdrive, lost in the heat of his skin and the smell of his neck. I’m thinking, Maybe this will be it. Maybe I’ll lose it right here, right now.</p> <p>It’s what I love about making out with someone. The possibility that this could be the one. Cue the lights. Cue the music. Love raining down on us all. Not that I’m all that experienced, especially compared to Alannis. I’ve officially given a few hand jobs and three or four unsuccessful blow jobs, had five and a half orgasms—not including the ones I’ve given myself—and made out with three boys, counting this one.</p> <p>Shane is kissing me, and his hands are everywhere—Oh yeah, I think, there. That’s good. The kissing is strictly for my benefit because Shane, like a lot of other guys at Mary Grove High, is more about all the things that aren’t kissing. His goal, always, is to get in my pants. I know this and he knows this, and he will kiss me for a while just to get there.</p>

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	<p>And I'll let him because he's actually good at it, and hey, I love kissing. And then all he's doing is grabbing me, but it's working because he's so obviously into me that I'm starting to feel a bit into me too.</p> <p>I think, Don't let it get too far, even as I'm helping him unzip his jeans. And then we're kissing again, harder and harder until I half expect him to inhale my tongue and my mouth and my entire face, and in the moment I want him to because of the way my body is pressing into his, wanting to feel more. I feel swept away and powerful at the same time. What are you waiting for?</p> <p>Shane has his tongue in my ear, but I can still hear the music outside. Laughter. Someone yelling something. At first I'm like, Oh God, yes, but then his tongue is a little too wet and he's giving me swimmer's ear. I want to push him away and shake the saliva out, but then he says, "God, you're so hot."</p> <p>Being hot is not what I'm known for, so I kiss him a while longer. But then I can't get over the fact that we're making out in a barn. At first I think, Okay, this is kind of sexy and Oh, look at me, but now I'm not sure I believe it. I imagine losing it to Shane Waller here in this hayloft, but of all the ways I've pictured my first time, it's never once been in a barn.</p> <p>Then he gives my underwear a tug, chasing the thoughts away. Leaving just Shane and me, nearly naked on top of all this straw, which is jabbing into my flesh like sharp little pencils. It's funny that I haven't really noticed the straw before this moment because I've been so swept up in the feeling of my flesh against Shane's flesh, the little fireworks that are springing up between body parts, threatening to set the hayloft on fire. This isn't the first time I've been nearly naked with Shane Waller, but it's the first time in a barn. I feel drunk, even though I'm not, and some far-flung part of me worries that if I can get turned on under these circumstances—sharp, jabbing straw, drunken classmates yelling outside—I will probably sleep with too many boys in college. Because making out is that much fun, even when you aren't in love. Sometimes it's just about his mouth or his eyes or his hands or the way they work all together. Sometimes that's enough.</p> <p>Shane's hands are snaking their way down, and the thinking, responsible part of me—the one that's saving herself for a boy named Wyatt Jones—mentally pulls back into the hay, just enough to separate from him, even as the physical part of me keeps right on going. I try to lose myself in him again, but the only thing I can feel is a million straw pencils digging into my back and the fireworks fizzling to an end so that all that's left is the after-haze and a distant burning smell.</p> <p>Suddenly there's something hard and damp against my thigh, and I shift a little so he can't slide it in.</p> <p>"Claude..."</p> <p>His voice is blurred, like he's out of focus, and my name sounds like Clod, which I hate. I feel momentarily bad because I was never going to have sex with him. It always ends the same way—him coming into the air or into his shirt or onto himself or against my leg.</p> <p>...Shane is staring at me and his eyes are rolling and his breath is coming faster and faster, and he's humping my leg like a dog. His face is half lit from the sliver of moon that shines through the crack in the door. I'll give him this: he's pretty good-looking and he smells nice. And for whatever reason he seems to like me. From what he can tell right now, I'm still in it. I haven't told him to stop or pushed him away. Until he strays a</p>

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	<p>little too far from my leg and I go, “Slow it down, cowboy.”</p> <p>He’s going to tell his friends either that I’m a tease or that we did it. I wish I could explain that it’s not about teasing or doing it; it’s about the possibility. It’s the almost. It’s the Maybe this time, the Maybe he’s the one. I want to say, For a few minutes I make you greater than yourself, and I’m greater than myself, and we’re greater than this barn because we are all this possibility and almostness and maybe.</p> <p>But you can’t explain things like almostness to a guy like Shane, so I maneuver my lower half away from him, and that’s when he groans and explodes. All over my inner thigh. And this is where I freak out a little, because I swear I can feel some of it dripping into me, and I roll over fast, pushing him away.</p> <p>He groans again and falls back onto the hay. I use his shirt to wipe myself off and then I untangle my dress from around my shoulders and smooth everything into place, and I can already hear what I’m going to say to Saz, the funny little spin I’ll put on it just for her: Unlike so many of our classmates here in farm country, I guess I’m just not a person destined for barn sex.</p>
27	<p>Claudine Blackwood, my mom’s great-aunt, was only five years old when her mother shot herself in the bedroom of their Georgia island home. It was after breakfast on a Thursday, and Claudine’s father had left the house moments earlier. Claudine was the one who heard the gunshot, who found her mom lying in a pool of her own blood.</p> <p>...I often wondered what that must have been like, to grow up in the same space where your mother killed herself, to walk by that bedroom thousands of times over the years.</p>
31	<p>Saz pulls a bottle of vodka out of her bag. She passes it to me and I drink, hating the taste. What I do like is the warm, burning feeling I get in my chest as soon as I swallow. Like there’s a little furnace deep inside.</p> <p>...I pass the bottle back to Saz, but she shakes her head. “Driving.” I take a drink for her.</p>
32	<p>She breathes out as if she’s been holding her breath for a long time. “I slept with Yvonne.” Before I can say, But we just saw her with Leah last night—or was it days ago? she says, “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you when it happened.”</p> <p>I say the first thing that comes to mind: “But she’s got a girlfriend.”</p> <p>...“When did you sleep with her?”</p> <p>“Three weeks ago. Remember when Mara and I went to Adam Katz’s? That weekend you were hanging out with Shane? It happened then.”</p> <p>...“I know we were supposed to wait to fall in love and have sex so we could do it at the same time, but we were ten when we made that pledge, Hen. You know I’ve dated. Maybe not a lot. Not as much as Alannis.”</p>
34	<p>She says, “I think we both know there’s only one box he wants to get into.”</p> <p>...With my free hand I grab the vodka bottle and drink, and the burning and the bone-vibrating music make me feel alive.</p>
39	<p>And now she has her mouth suctioned to his.</p> <p>...“Men suck,” she says. “That’s why I’m thankful I like women.”</p> <p>That night my phone buzzes and it’s Shane. I stupidly think maybe he’s going to apologize for—what? Wanting to have sex with me? Not being the boy I wanted him to be? He’s sent a photo, and at first I’m not sure what exactly I’m looking at, but then I recognize it. Shane naked from the waist down, and the caption This is what you’re missing. Let me know if you change your mind.</p>

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	There are a thousand things I could write back—Your dick is the last thing on my mind, for starters—but instead I just delete the whole thread.
46	Saz says, “I love you more than freedom and vodka and skinny-dipping.”
51	<p>“In case I never see you again, I just want you to know that I like you. I’ve liked you since sophomore year.”</p> <p>...Which is why I say, “I want to kiss you now. I hope that’s okay.”</p> <p>...It only takes a second or two, and then he gets this smile on his face, and says, “That’s definitely okay with me.” I lean in and kiss him. His mouth is warm. I can taste the sweat and salt. I am kissing Wyatt Jones. I tell myself this to make myself feel it and believe it and know it as much as I can. I keep my mouth pressed to his as long as possible.</p>
60	<p>Another text appears from him:</p> <p>I should’ve asked you out last year. I want to kiss you again.</p> <p>Me: I want to kiss you too.</p> <p>...I want to lick the screen, but instead I scroll through my photos and try to send him one of me from spring break in my bikini to remind him what I look like and to show him that I have curves—such as they are—and legs and skin that would feel good against his own. I press send and wait.</p>
61	He smells like weed and incense and wears too many skull rings.
84	<p>I pull out <i>The Joy of Sex</i> by Dr. Alex Comfort, which looks as if it hasn't been opened since the 1970s, and flip through the pages. The illustrations make me think of police sketches, and there is hair everywhere. I'm so mesmerized I don't even sit down. I just stand there reading.</p> <p>Never blow into the vagina. This trick can cause air embolism and has caused sudden death.</p> <p>"Oh my God," I say to Dandelion. "You won't believe this." I keep flipping and reading. Each entry is funnier and more outdated than the next.</p> <p>Vibrators are no substitute for a penis</p> <p>cassiolette: French for perfume box. The natural perfume of a clean woman: her greatest sexual asset after her beauty.</p>
86	There’s liquor in the house, but it’s locked in a cabinet. I scrounge through drawers for the key, but the only thing I come up with is an old pack of Virginia Slims. I throw these into my bag too, along with a lighter.
88	This was the homestead where my great-great-grandmother, Aunt Claudine’s mother, died—where the gun went off, where they found her body, where the bullet carved a perfect hole in the closet door—and where Claudine lived out her life until the house burned in 1993 and she died two months later.
102	<p>Sometime during the night I’ve shed my pajama bottoms and I lie there in my top and underwear. I try to conjure Wyatt’s face. His mouth. But instead of Wyatt, I see Jeremiah Crew. Wise-ass expression. Compass tattoo on his shoulder. Hands, broad and strong. I push his image away, but he comes right back.</p> <p>Claudine, it says, that mouth of his, I want you. Don’t you know how I feel about you? Don’t you know how much I want you?</p> <p>Yes, I breathe. Take me.</p>
109	It’s the way she says Yvonne, like they have secrets between them. Ordering pizza and having sex and falling in love, while I’m on the outside, 843 miles away.

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	<p>...They don't begin to understand her sexuality or her sense of humor, but they are sweet and well meaning, and they try. Her dad goes to marches with her and wears Pride shirts and lets her decorate his car with rainbow bumper stickers, and every night he tells her he loves her, no matter what.</p>
114	<p>I climb the steps and join them, and Jared passes me a beer. I drink it down, and it's cool and bitter, and I like the taste of it. ...Several beers later, I know that the girl is Wednesday, another inn staffer, originally from Alabama, and the boy is Emory, a junior nature guide who grew up in South Carolina.</p>
118	<p>We sit. We drink. ...Another beer later, the rain has stopped, and I'm dry and cozy and tucked into the couch of the living room of the dorm-type house that they share with the other staffers.</p>
119	<p>He rests his arm on the back of the couch, and he smells intoxicating. Not like weed and incense but something else.</p>
122	<p>"No, it's true. I can't think of another place I'd rather be. Even if this isn't where I'm supposed to be right now. Even if I was never supposed to be here. Even if I was supposed to be in Ohio. At Kayla Rosenthal's party, as a matter of fact. Drinking vodka with Saz and my other friends and making out with Wyatt Jones and getting ready for the road trip of a lifetime and going home and sleeping in the bed I've slept in since I was ten. Even though I never wanted a canopy bed, but my dad thought it must be something little girls like, and so he surprised me, which was really sweet. But that was back when he wanted us. And even though I'm now sleeping in a bed that doesn't belong to me, staring at a photograph of a dead boy who will always be twelve years old. No matter what. So if I put you out yesterday because I was upset, well, I'm sorry. But I wasn't drowning. Not literally. I didn't ask you to save me. Because I can save myself. Not that I need saving. But you know what I mean."</p>
123	<p>My chest is tight and I'm wishing I had another beer to drown out the noise in my head.</p>
129	<p>"Remember when I said you remind me of someone? I was talking about me. I was angry for a long time. I used to get into fights. I hated anyone who was different from me. I thought I was better than everyone else. I was a real asshole. I got caught smoking weed on school property, and maybe I sold an ounce or two, but never to kids. Always over at the college, and the money went to my mom and groceries for the family. In my mind, I was a kind of drug-dealing Robin Hood. The first time I came here, it was because the judge gave me a choice: spend a summer camping with a bunch of aspiring criminals or spend a summer on a juvenile-detention work farm with a bunch of aspiring criminals. Camping sounded better, so I came here through this group called Outward Bound—heard of it?"</p>
131	<p>I say, "I want to kiss you now. I hope that's okay." ...I lean over and kiss him. For a second I'm worried he's not going to kiss me back. But then his lips are on mine just as much as mine are on his, soft and searching, little sparks everywhere. And then his hand is on my face and I like the feeling of it there, strong and warm and pulling me in, not pushing me away. I open my mouth and his tongue finds mine, and I'm tasting him and he tastes sweet and also dangerous, and I move in closer and he</p>

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	<p>pulls me closer and I'm kissing him and he's kissing me, and this isn't any Claude I know. This is some girl with short hair who makes out with strange boys on strange beaches. And she likes it, this girl. She likes him.</p> <p>...She's just here with him, mouth to mouth, tongue to tongue. Let him think I'm a girl who makes out on beaches or anywhere else she wants to. As far as he knows, this is exactly who I am. And then my hands are all over him and his hands are on my waist, and I want this moment to last forever because in it I don't have to think or be the me I used to know, the one who was sent away without a choice.</p> <p>...And he's smiling at me like I'm a kid and not the woman who's just been kissing him senseless for the past couple of minutes.</p> <p>"Wow," he says.</p> <p>And I think, Yeah. Wow.</p> <p>"You really want me."</p>
133	<p>And then I'm Claude Henry again, making out with some strange boy on a strange beach in my jeans and light blue hoodie, the one with the grape-juice stain on the hem, covered in sand, skin freckled and burned a bright, painful pink from the Georgia sun, and being bitten everywhere by unseen Georgia bugs.</p>
140	<p>I'm pretty sure I won't be home before your trip because I'm entombed on Godforsaken Island.</p> <p>I wish I could kiss you. Although right now all I can think about is kissing Jeremiah Crew. Sometimes at night I close my eyes and imagine you're in my bed. When I'm not imagining Jeremiah Crew instead.</p>
143	<p>And then his hands are on my waist, on my hips, his fingers widespread and strong, so warm against my shirt that the warmth reaches into my skin. He pulls me to him and says, "I'm going to kiss you right now because I've been thinking about kissing you all morning. I'm telling you this because it's going to be a fucking incredible kiss, so I want you to brace yourself. I know you promised me you wouldn't fall in love, but I completely understand if that changes after this. I will now await your blessing."</p> <p>...And then he kisses me. His lips are soft but firm, and I fall into them. There, underneath the sun, my brain goes light, my skin goes light, I go light. I am weightless. And then I slide my hands under his shirt, up his back, across the fine, taut muscles, and gently, so gently, run my nails up and down his skin. He's not the only one in control here. I can feel him bend into me, and then I let him go.</p>
147	<p>I'm trying to concentrate on the words, but as soon as he says them, they change into touch kiss feel skin naked.</p> <p>...The words morph into See these hands? I want to touch you all over with them.</p> <p>...I completely miss the next thing he says because I'm now thinking of him lying in bed, probably naked, alone on his side, the other side still made.</p>
150	<p>"What are you doing in the basement?"</p> <p>"Making out with this hot girl I found down here. But now you've locked us in." And he lets go of me so that he can walk toward her voice.</p> <p>"You should have found me and told me you were coming."</p> <p>"I was too busy making out."</p>
161	<p>Let's go back inside this truck so you can kiss me all over my body or let's go to the beach and lay that blanket down on the sand....</p>

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166	<p>And then he's pulling off the army shorts, and his clothes are lying on the beach, and he's fully naked. He walks away from me, straight into the ocean.</p> <p>I stand there realizing I have a choice. I can sit down here on the sand and wait. Or I can take off my dress and go in.</p> <p>...I wait till his head disappears under the water and pull off my dress. I drop it on top of his clothes, and now I'm in panties, no bra. I leave my bottoms on, cover up my chest with my hands, and half skip, half walk to the water before I can change my mind. I wade in until I'm up to my waist and then crouch down so that the ocean covers me.</p> <p>...He says, "Jesus, you're beautiful." And kisses me.</p> <p>...I swim to Miah and wrap my legs around him, and even though I'm not naked, he is, and somehow this feels like the closest I've ever been to a boy. His arms are around me and we bob and float like this, my cheek to his, my chest to his, my heart to his, for a long time.</p> <p>He walks naked all the way back to the pile we've left in the sand, and I can't help but sneak peeks at him, lean and gold, wet skin glimmering in the moonlight.</p> <p>...And it's very, very clear that our time together in the water has affected him.</p>
169	<p>It happens swiftly. His mouth is on mine, and he's pulling me in or maybe I'm pulling him in. Whichever way it happens, we kiss and kiss. When we finally break apart, he says, "Wow." Just like before, only not like before.</p>
172	<p>After we wind down, Emory sighs. "I need to get laid. There aren't a lot of options on an island."</p> <p>..."Like, I wonder if sex is really different when you're in love with someone." And even though I'm a virgin, I want to say sex is just sex. It doesn't matter who you do it with, as long as you have their consent and they have yours, and as long as you like their hands on you and their mouth on yours.</p>
173	<p>"I want to see what it's like with different people. See what I'm like with different people. People of all genders. To have the chance to love who I love, and if I actually do fall in love, great. If not, at least I'll have some fun. The thing I know is that I don't want to get hung up on any one person right now." For some reason she's looking at me.</p> <p>"Because it always ends the same, right? You have a good time and they have a good time and everyone's having fun, and then once the chase is over, suddenly they start chasing after someone else like you never existed. Besides, I like being me too much."</p> <p>..."What about you? You ever been laid before?"</p> <p>...I watch as the fireworks explode and then die over the water. I think about making up a story, something elaborate and erotic. Possibly even breaking out Shane Waller and my near sex in a barn.</p> <p>But everyone else is being honest, including New Claude, which is why I say, "Almost. There's a boy back in Ohio."</p> <p>...Wednesday says, "My sister believes it doesn't technically count as sex unless it's a penis and a vagina. Like, if she does anal, she's still a virgin."</p> <p>Emory stares at her. "So then, according to her, nothing counts except hetero sex?"</p> <p>...I say, "My best friend is a lesbian, and she's in love. And I don't think she'd agree that the sex she's having with her girlfriend doesn't count."</p> <p>...I don't think there's any such thing as technically. It's about who you're with and how you feel. Sex is sex. Love is love. I don't need some stupid 1950s construct to tell me</p>

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	<p>what it is or isn't. However it happens, whatever it looks like, I think you know in here"—I tap the space over my heart—" if you're still a virgin or not."</p>
176	<p>What if I just found his house tonight and slipped into his bed and surprised him? I imagine it. His skin. My skin. Naked. Hot. Him. Him. Him. This boy who knows me so well already and likes me anyway, in spite of myself. I touch my arm and it's on fire at the thought of him. ...Emory offers Miah a beer.</p>
178	<p>He laughs. I set the skull down and perch on the edge of the sofa, forcing my mind to focus, to not get ahead of itself, to not picture the two of us naked in his bed, which is exactly what it wants to do.</p>
179	<p>He leans in. Kisses me. Before I can get lost in him, I pull back. ...He arches an eyebrow. "There's vodka in the freezer that's about a hundred years old. Courtesy of Bram and Shirley, but I keep it around for guests." ...I watch as he goes into the kitchen, opens the freezer, pulls out the vodka, pours me two fingers' worth. I want to tell him to fill it up—maybe I need to feel a little braver after all—but I don't want to seem like a lush. When he's back, I say, "Aren't you having some?" "I've done enough drinking in my life. I stopped at fourteen. I stopped everything at fourteen." ...He kisses me. I kiss him. My blood and my heart are pumping again, so strong and hard that I wonder if my body can hold them. He touches my face, and then his hand wanders south. And that's it. Yes yes yes. Suddenly I'm the bravest person in the world. I climb on top of him so that I'm straddling his lap, and I can feel him through his shorts as we kiss harder and harder. And now we're lying down, me on top of him, and I have to pull away for a moment because it's too much and my heart is going to burst. We're both making these heavy breathing sounds as we try to fill our lungs, and I can hear my heart slamming against my chest as if it's trying to break out of there. He throws the pillows on the floor to make more room for us. Kisses me again. Wraps his arms around me tight. Rolls me over so that I'm under him, and we somehow manage to stay on the couch. We lock eyes, and then he moves in, and everything is blurred, and his lips are on mine, and the only thing that exists is his mouth and his skin and the fine, tight muscles of his back under my hands. I kiss him until we go boomeranging into the danger zone, the one barricaded and police-taped and littered with smoke bombs and alarm bells and CAUTION signs. The one that makes my brain go numb and keeps me from thinking about anything else. I ignore the voice in my head that's shouting, This is actually going to happen. I can feel myself close to the edge, and now the couch is on fire and the entire back of me, head to toe, is burning, but I don't care. He senses it and I can feel him shift a little, but I won't let him go. So now we're both burning up right here on this sofa. But this time I don't stop. Not even as he's telling me he's STD-free, only safe sex practiced here. Not even as he says, "Are you sure? Remember—four weeks. That's it. Less than that now." "Yes," I say. "Yes." "I'm kidding, but not, Captain. I won't go any further without your consent."</p>

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	<p>This throws me because I don't remember Shane ever asking me for my blessing. I can say no, and we can stop right here.</p> <p>"Yes," I say again. "You have it. As long as I have your consent too."</p> <p>And I can tell by the look on his face that this throws him. "Yes," he says, very low.</p> <p>"God, yes."</p> <p>To prove to myself and him that I'm sure, that this is one thousand percent what I want, I pull his shirt off, kiss his neck, his shoulder, his chest. He groans a little and then he's pulling off my dress, the red-and-white one I bought last July 4. I'm braless, in underwear, and he's still in his shorts. I reach for these next, and when I can't get them off him, he helps, and he's not wearing underwear at all, so he's completely naked, and now I can really look at him because I think maybe it's expected or maybe I finally want to know, and there's this little trail of gold hair on his chest that leads all the way down. I fight the urge to cover myself with my hands. Instead I let him kiss my breasts, and while I've technically gone this far with a boy, right now it feels so much further.</p> <p>Next my panties come off, all at once, both legs at the same time, and he's looking at my body, and I resist the urge to grab the blanket on the back of the couch and cover up. I let him look at me, but not for long, because I'm kissing him, and his hands are in what's left of my hair, and then he's rolling on his side and fishing around in the pocket of his shorts for something.</p> <p>He's getting a condom.</p> <p>When he rolls back toward me, condom in hand, I go, "Wow. You're confident."</p> <p>"Not confident. Hopeful. Although, hello." He waves at his body and gives me this cheesy grin. And then his face shifts into a genuine smile, and I can't help it, I kiss the dimples on either side of his mouth, and then he's kissing my throat, and just when I think my body might explode like a firework, it happens.</p> <p>I'm in my body and out of it at the same time. Even as it's happening, there's a part of me narrating everything for myself: Now he's opening the condom packet. Now he's putting the condom on.</p> <p>My head is taking over, and I just want it to shut the hell up and let my body be in charge.</p> <p>Now you can feel him. Now he's putting the condom in.</p> <p>There's the surprise of him inside me, even though I'm expecting it. It's like my fifth-grade birthday party, when everyone hid in my bedroom, and I knew they were going to surprise me because Saz told me ahead of time, but I still freaked out when they started screaming and running at me.</p> <p>He goes, "Are you okay, Captain?"</p> <p>"Yeah. Of course."</p> <p>My mind tells my body to stop thinking about my fifth-grade birthday party and move, for God's sake, so I move. But I feel like the Tin Man in The Wizard of Oz, all jerky and stiff. And suddenly I'm thinking about The Wizard of Oz, a movie I don't even like, and now I'm thinking about thinking about The Wizard of Oz so much that I almost forget to narrate what's happening.</p> <p>Now you can feel him—all of him. And there's the surprise again. Not pain, necessarily, but the surprise of my body registering something entirely new. I actually suck in air. A loud, gasping, hiccupping sound that makes him stop what he's doing and look at me funny. Before he can ask what the hell that was or change his mind about ever wanting to have sex with me, I kiss him. I wonder if I'm bleeding all over his couch, if my mythical</p>

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	<p>hymen has actually broken. Even if it hasn't, and even if it's the most awkward, terrible sex that has ever been had on this planet, I know that technically this counts. This counts. Even though virginity is a heteronormative, patriarchal construct...</p> <p>Now he's moving on top of you.</p> <p>And you are moving with him even though you don't know how.</p> <p>Please, please, please shut up, brain.</p> <p>And then, by some miracle... my mind goes quiet. And my body takes over. It's as if it knows something I don't, as if my body and his know each other and understand each other, as if they're meant to move together like this.</p> <p>But then, suddenly, we're done. Which means he's done. And this is another surprising thing—the fact that the ending seems to depend on him. I almost tell him, Hey, I need more. I'm not done. But I don't say anything.</p> <p>And just like that, in a single moment, all those years of waiting are over.</p>
185	<p>My name is Claude Henry, and I just had sex for the first time.</p> <p>...The door opens behind me and it's Miah, still naked. Instinctively, I look away, which is silly because minutes ago he was literally inside me.</p>
188	<p>Apparently some women and the occasional man can pass out cold after orgasm.</p>
192	<p>If she'd said, I know you used to masturbate to Wyatt Jones, I couldn't be more surprised.</p>
198	<p>"I'm a virgin. Was a virgin."</p> <p>"When?"</p> <p>"Two nights ago. Before we had sex."</p> <p>..."So let me get this straight. I ask if you're sure and you're like, 'Oh yeah, I'm sure, just give me some vodka—' "</p> <p>..."I thought guys got off on virgins."</p> <p>..."So now I'm the asshole. Hooking up with a girl I find both interesting and hot, and I'm not sure I would've done that if I'd known. It was your first time. It should have been, I don't know, special. I could have made it special."</p> <p>"Wow. Okay. So why me? You just thought, Hey, he's fun. I'll get my rocks off and I can tell all my friends back home that I scored with the island boy?"</p> <p>"Isn't that what you did with me? Scoring with the summer girl?" Isn't that what you did last summer with Wednesday?</p>
201	<p>"I didn't have to tell you it was my first time and I don't owe you an explanation, but I came here because I like you and I wanted to be honest with you. I know you like to 'lead' and all, but you don't get to lead in this. We both made a choice, and if you can get your ass off your shoulders, we might even make that choice again. But it's a choice for both of us to make. And if we do decide to do it again, here's a word to the wise—it doesn't just automatically end when you come."</p> <p>...I say, "And maybe, Jeremiah Crew, you should treat every time like it's the first time."</p>
207	<p>We've been going back and forth all morning. Topic: sex. Specifically: our first times. Here's the thing, she says. No matter what they tell you, no matter what they show you online or in movies, it looks different in real life. Not worse or better, just different. It's different than doing it yourself because there's this other person there and maybe they don't know how to touch you like you know how to touch you, but there's a lot to say for you wanting them and them wanting you. Having sex with Yvonne makes me feel like I'm invincible, and it also makes me feel totally, I don't know, human.</p>

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	<p>...I text back: It makes sense. Somehow him touching me and me not coming was bigger than me touching myself and coming.</p> <p>...Saz texts: Yvonne and I used a dental dam. Because guess what? Lesbians can get STDs too, folks. I'd never even heard of such a thing, but Yvonne's had more partners than I have, including Robbie Ziffren, and she's super careful. (Remember Ziff? He was a senior when we were sophomores.)</p>
210	<p>"So did you do it? Did you sleep with him?"</p> <p>"We've been hanging out—"</p> <p>"So you are sleeping with him."</p>
216	<p>"So Wednesday and I hung out for a couple weeks last summer. It was basically just sex, and every now and then we'd, like, go to the beach or hang out around the Dip, which is mostly what she wanted to do. I'm not planning to hook up with her again, much less while hanging out with you. If I wanted to be with Wednesday, I'd be with her."</p>
218	<p>He leans over and kisses me. He wraps his arm around me and I nestle into him and it feels good there.</p>
221	<p>"I actually prefer wild-animal-wrangling, shark-teeth-collecting, freedom-dispensing warrior. Why don't you touch them, Captain? Go ahead—you know you want to. They're the softest things on earth." He kisses me. "Next to your lips."</p> <p>I kiss him back and then we're basically making out against the truck.</p> <p>"Ready?" he says into my ear, and at first I think he means, Are you ready to have sex again? Here, with me, in this truck?</p> <p>"Ready." Yes I am.</p>
222	<p>He pulls off his shirt, and at first I think he's going to just keep going and shed his shorts too. I go kind of cold and hot all at once because I really want him to strip down, and I'm imagining yanking off my dress and standing there in only mud boots, my underwear, and five inches of bug spray. But then he holds the shirt out to me.</p>
223	<p>He leans in and kisses me, tongue finding mine. I drink him in, the warmth of him, the smell of him, the taste of him.</p> <p>"I can't wait to be naked with you again," he says.</p> <p>And then we're kissing like two wild animals, and just as we're tugging at each other's clothes and getting ready to throw each other down in this mud and spartina and marsh, a horn blares from somewhere.</p> <p>...Grady waves at us from the deck, wearing a big fat smirk, and I think what we must look like, groping each other, my hair standing on end.</p>
228	<p>Then he kisses me and I feel safe here, in his arms like this, as if nothing bad will happen in the world ever again.</p> <p>...And then he takes my face in his hands, brushes the hair off my forehead, and kisses me again.</p>
229	<p>"Mom." I think, Oh my God, please don't know we had sex.</p>
237	<p>He says, "As you may remember, I've got protection."</p> <p>I lean in and kiss him. He kisses me and it's soft like a whisper.</p> <p>...I kiss him harder, and his mouth answers mine, and then his hands are on my face and my hands are on his back, and now I'm unbuttoning the sky-blue shirt.</p> <p>... No mental narration, just completely and totally one hundred percent on-the-bed here.</p>

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	<p>...And I know enough to know this isn't always how it will be, but this is how it feels right now with Miah as we fall onto the bed and undress each other until we are just skin against skin everywhere.</p> <p>...I am on that bed with him. I don't wonder if my body is a disappointment. I don't worry about where to put this arm or this leg. I just move with him, and at first it's just us moving together but separately. He's touching me, and the room starts to spin with light. All these fireflies of light swirling and sparkling around me. When I touch him, he groans in my ear and pulls away.</p> <p>I watch as he reaches for the condom. He hesitates and I know he's not going to do anything until I say, "Okay." So I say, "Okay." And I watch as he rolls it on the same way he did the first time.</p> <p>And then he's back and kissing me. And a moment later I feel the tip of him, and even though this isn't the first time, it feels like the first time. Maybe the way the first time should have felt.</p> <p>He is going slowly, watching my face, reading my face. I run my hands over his back and arms, which are taut from the way he's holding himself up and over me, and I want more of him. I want all of him.</p> <p>But first he leans down and kisses me, and I kiss him harder and more urgently to let him know it's okay. It's yes. It's now. My body is wanting his. And I am burning up, head to toe, little fires everywhere.</p> <p>Then I can feel him. All of him. And it hurts a little, but that's more the surprise again of having another body in your body, the getting used to something new.</p> <p>But it's funny how fast my body adapts. It's like, Oh, hello there. Why haven't we done it like this sooner?</p> <p>And I'm into it. And he's into it. And he's literally in it, as in my vagina. (Vagina, really? I mean, penis? Like, why are these words so completely unsexy?) And then, oh my God, I laugh out loud at this. And he pulls back and looks at me and goes, "Uh. Captain?"</p> <p>And I say, "I mean, vagina? Penis? Could they have come up with less sexy words?"</p> <p>And then he's laughing too, and he kisses my forehead and mumbles something into my neck like, "God, that brain of yours." And then the laughter falls away onto the sheets, into the mattress, and we are done talking. There's only music and the sound of our breathing.</p> <p>It takes us a moment, but then we hit this rhythm, and for a couple of minutes it's not like a second first time. I know he feels it too because of the way he's looking at me, and then the way he's kissing me, and then the way he stops worrying about hurting me and is just moving with me and not holding back, and I tell myself not to hold back either. Which for me means letting go of this summer and my parents and Saz and everything familiar, including my virginity. The way he's touching me tells me that he's remembering what I said about sex not being just about him.</p> <p>He touches me here...</p> <p>And here...</p> <p>And here...</p> <p>And moves inside me, his eyes locked with mine.</p> <p>And then—</p> <p>There is a moment where I actually do let go. It's more like a letting go and a taking total control at the same time. I feel infinite. Free. It's this perfect, beautiful moment, my body going heavy and light all at once. I hold on to it until I feel it melt away into the</p>

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	sheets and up toward the beamed ceiling and out through the windows, where it disappears into the ocean beyond.
244	<p>I love: The way he kisses me just behind the ear and at the curve of my throat where neck meets collarbone.</p> <p>...The way he explores me, as if he's creating a map of all my erogenous zones—the places that make me laugh and smile and sigh.</p> <p>The way his breath feels on my hip bone, on my inner thigh.</p> <p>The way he looks at me just before he kisses me, like I'm all there is in the world.</p>
247	Right before he picked me up, my legs around his waist, and kissed me.
248	I tell her voice mail, "This is me calling you. I love you more than kissing and foreplay and sex itself."
261	<p>"Why are we stopping?"</p> <p>"Can't I just make out with you?" He's grinning at me, but not really at me because he's still somewhere else, like he's phoning it in.</p> <p>"You can, but why are we stopping?" Because I know he's up to something.</p>
262	<p>"Wait. Kiss me."</p> <p>He moves closer, bracing the bike with his legs. Then he puts his hands on either side of my face and pulls me to him. And kisses me long and deep, as if I'm a soldier going off to war. I drink it in because his hands on my face and his mouth on mine make me feel like he's actually here after all, and even more than that, they make me feel like I'm here too.</p>
272	<p>The first and only party I've ever thrown was in seventh grade. Saz and I spent days making the decorations and invitations and creating a Twister-size board game that combined Seven Minutes in the Closet and Spin the Bottle and Never Have I Ever all in one, guaranteeing we would get to, at the very least, second base. We invited everyone in our class and spent the entire night watching my crush (Zachary Dunn) and her crush (Harriet Loos) making out in a corner.</p> <p>...I catch a whiff of something—weed, maybe.</p>
273	Fifth grade. My mom came to my room and sat down on my bed and answered every question I had about sex. The next day she gave me a copy of <i>Our Bodies, Ourselves</i> , and I learned to masturbate. I did it almost every day for all of fifth grade, like this miraculous secret hobby that only I knew about. I used my hand, my electric toothbrush, my stuffed animals, anything I could rub up against. My stuffed animals developed crooked necks from all the rubbing.
274	<p>I remember my first time," she says.</p> <p>"Oh God."</p> <p>"His name was Ryan and he was a year older, and I thought he was the most amazing thing ever. I was going into my senior year, and he went off to college in Texas and said he wanted me to still be his girlfriend. I think he only called me, like, twice after he left. He was always too busy, and later I found out he'd come home to see his parents but hadn't told me. I was devastated. He tried to win me back over the summer, but by that point I was done."</p>
276	Emory says, "I was fifteen the first time. I thought it was mind-blowing. But I look back now, experienced man of nineteen that I am—"

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	<p>...Wednesday says, "How You Lost It. Specifically when and, if you feel like offering it up, who."</p>
280	<p>I'm on top of him in my bed, and he's laughing. I lean in and kiss him, and when I pull away, there's this look on his face. It's hard to read, but it's like this mix of happiness and something else—love, maybe.</p> <p>I say, "Why didn't you play How You Lost It?"</p> <p>"Because I'm not twelve." He kisses me again, and that look is still there. "I wish you hadn't slept with her. It would be a lot easier to be her friend."</p> <p>"I wish I hadn't slept with her either."</p> <p>"So how many have there been? Girls, I mean?" And as I ask it, my heart is racing, and I want to say, Don't tell me. Please don't tell me.</p> <p>..."You're the only boy I've slept with."</p> <p>"But not the only one you've fooled around with."</p>
281	<p>Five minutes later, we're going through <i>The Joy of Sex</i>, studying the police drawings and reading misogynistic passages to each other in a whisper. He delivers his with the drollness of Mr. Hernandez, my tenth-grade Spanish teacher, and I bury my face in the pillow to muffle my laughter.</p> <p>"Man, this book really is horrible," he says. "But the positions are... interesting." He holds one up. I shake my head.</p> <p>"There are better ones." I take the book from him.</p> <p>We settle on the flannel, which is like Twister, only without the board. The book doesn't give us much to go on, and right away he gets a foot to the nose, to the eye, to the chin, and I get a cramp in my calf, which means we have to take time out while I hop up and down, wrapped in the sheet because there is no way I'm flapping around in front of him with my boobs hanging out.</p> <p>The cramp eventually goes away. We compose ourselves. I climb back onto the bed and we try again. This time he gets another foot to the face before I end up falling off the bed with a loud thud. We freeze, me on the floor, and listen. I say, "I think we need something a little quieter."</p> <p>I lie back down and he closes the book, sliding it under the bed, out of our sight. "Maybe this is a good time to tell you about the research I've been doing." His voice is almost a whisper. "What kind of research?" "Sexual research." "Like porn?" "I'm talking actual educational articles, like 'How to Give Your Woman Pleasure' and 'How to Make Sure You're Taking Care of Your Lady.' I figure you can never learn enough when it comes to satisfying your girlfriend."</p> <p>"When did you do this research?"</p> <p>"The last time I was off-island."</p> <p>"So did you learn anything?"</p> <p>"Not a damn thing." He reaches for my phone. "May I? For illustrative purposes?" I nod. He props himself up on an elbow. The glow of the screen lights his face as he pretends to read. "Actually, that's not true. There are eighty thousand nerve endings in the clitoris."</p> <p>"Okay. I did not know that."</p> <p>"Also: 'She may not appreciate direct contact.' One said: 'Use her body as your guide.'" He lies there, pretending to scroll through the phone. "Useless, useless, useless." He stops scrolling and then fakes throwing my phone across the room. He leans over and</p>

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	<p>kisses me. "I want the lights on to see every bit of you." I take his hand and place it between my legs, positioning his fingers exactly like I'd position mine. "If you want to know how to give your woman pleasure," I say, "just ask."</p>
282	<p>A little later, he does the same, guiding my hand, showing me when and where and how to touch him. Afterward we lie on our sides, facing each other, and I ask him, "What does sex feel like for you?" He takes my hand, presses our palms together, finger to finger. "Jesus, Captain, your hands are big for a girl." "Answer the question." ..."I don't know. I used to say that nobody does me better than I do, but then you came along. I guess it's kind of like this pressure, good pressure, on every square inch of my body that builds and builds, until finally it gathers all in one spot and it feels as if I'll explode into smithereens. And when I do, it's like I've been carrying sixty thousand pounds—like what's-his-name, Atlas—only instead of carrying the world, I can lift it up over my head and start winging it around until I launch it into another solar system. It's sunrise, sunset, and the perfect tide combined into one." He lets go of my hand and traces my curves with his fingers. "What's it feel like for you?" "You know that night we drove with the lights off and we saw a million lightning bugs? It's like if you could catch every single one of them and put them in a jar, and as they're all lighting up at once, you open the lid and set them free."</p>
283	<p>"Yeah, I don't think so." We kiss for a while, my hands in his hair, his skin against mine. I concentrate on the warmth and the heat, forgetting about my mom down the hall. After a moment he whispers, "One of those articles did offer some interesting advice." "What's that?" He says in my ear, "Don't forget about the rest of her body."</p>
301	<p>When we get back to the house, the living room lights are on and I can see my mom and Addy through the front window, right where I left them. Under those stars, up against the side of the house, Miah kisses me. I stand on tiptoe so I can be almost as tall as he is, so I can kiss him as hard as he's kissing me. I want you I want you I want you, I think. Now now now.</p>
307	<p>Around ten p.m., I'm in the yard playing some sort of beanbag-toss drinking game. Miah is nowhere to be found, and so it's Wednesday and me against Jared and Emory, and I'm downing beer after beer and enjoying the way the alcohol and the music are drowning out the noise in my head.</p>
308	<p>Then he tells me that Rashid killed himself three years ago in August.</p>
310	<p>And I'm not sure who's talking—me, who's had too much to drink and is walking around with no floor, or the girl in the mirror, whose features are all in place, just like always. ...It's just a room, not some love den filled with pinups and bong, like I expected.</p>
311	<p>I give him mine and he pulls me to my feet, and then that hand is on my face, tracing the line of my jaw, and his forehead is against mine, and his eyes are on my mouth, and I stand like a statue, stiff and unmoving. But I don't pull away because suddenly I want his mouth on mine, to chase away the thoughts that are creeping back into my head.</p>

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	<p>Maybe that's what I've wanted since I crashed into him downstairs. And then—without asking—he kisses me.</p> <p>...I make myself kiss him back even as part of me is going, Stop this.</p> <p>...I kiss him harder and he kisses me harder. His teeth bang against mine, and instead of stopping I keep going. Harder and harder.</p> <p>I kiss him until I feel his hand on the skin of my back, underneath my shirt, and then I pull away as if my brain has suddenly come back to me, along with all my common sense, along with me, actual Claude, who—floor or no floor—doesn't want to kiss Grady.</p>
313	<p>But instead I launch myself at him. Kiss him hard. Catching him off guard. He wraps his arms around me and lifts me over the threshold and into the house, and now I'm against the wall in the kitchen and I can't kiss him hard enough. I tug at his shorts, as in I practically rip them off him, and that's when he pulls back. Lays his hand on mine.</p> <p>"Hey. What is this?"</p> <p>"I want you."</p> <p>"Yeah, we've established that. What's going on?"</p> <p>"Nothing. Can't I just want you?"</p> <p>"Fair enough."</p> <p>I kiss him again and he starts kissing me back, and there it is—his wonderful mouth, the mouth I know, the one I'm supposed to be kissing. And then he wraps an arm around me and kind of carries me upright to his bedroom, where we fall onto the bed and I can't get him close enough. I'm swept up in him and the heat of us, and at the same time Grady's mouth is there. I need to forget the way it felt on mine. To forget everything Addy said about my dad. I need it out of me, back on the mainland, maybe as far as the moon.</p> <p>It's like my life depends on the sex I'm about to have.</p> <p>The rest of his clothes are coming off, and mine are coming off, and we're naked, but not naked enough, and I just don't want to think about anything other than us and my body and what I'm feeling. Because if I stop, Grady is there and my dad is there, and I have to think about my mom and me, the two of us, homeless and cast out except for the house Addy's letting us live in. I don't want another before and after. Before my dad left us. After my dad found this other woman. No more before and afters. For once I just want to be Claude Now.</p> <p>Suddenly I realize there's no condom.</p> <p>I say, "Aren't you forgetting something?"</p> <p>"Shit. Hold on."</p>
322	<p>"So look, when I was sixteen, I started putting myself in a box because I figured it would keep me from getting hurt. I took care of that box like it was my freaking home. At first, the box was good. Small, compact, everything safe inside it. I kept it neat and tidy. I painted it. Painted who I wanted to be. I didn't let myself be seen or heard. I made my sexuality small and quiet instead of big and bright. But I started not being able to breathe, so that's when I pushed open the box flaps, one by one. The last was running away from Alabama to live the life I wanted to live. And saying to someone other than myself, This is me. I want to be a singer. I want to change the world with my music. I want to fall in love and get my heart broken. I'm pansexual. I seem tough, but I'm not.</p>

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	At least not always. So yeah. Here I am. Out of the box. And sometimes it sucks. But at least I can breathe.”
323	We are reading the subtitles. “She died at forty of suicide. She was missing for ten days before they found her body in the back seat of her car, three blocks from her Paris apartment.”
350	This is where my mom and I had the talk about Santa Claus and, later, the talk about sex.
362	<p>He plants a kiss on my elbow. He rotates my arm a little to the right, to the left, and then kisses the inside of my wrist. The back of my hand is next, followed by my shoulder and my palm.</p> <p>“What are you doing?”</p> <p>“I’m kissing all your freckles.” He kisses my knee. “Or maybe all of you.” He kisses my other knee. “I don’t think I’ve ever kissed you here.” And then he kisses my belly button. “Or here.” He kisses my ear. On and on, taking his time.</p> <p>I know without kissing him all over that he has a heart-shaped freckle on his left shoulder and a scar under his chin. I know that the arm hair that is gold in most light turns reddish in the sun. I know that his right big toe is slightly longer than his left big toe and that there is another scar on his left knee.</p> <p>As he makes his way up my other arm to my shoulder, to my ear, I worry about all this close-up scrutiny of my body in the daylight. The freckles, the little too much flesh here, the not enough flesh there, every bump and flaw. But it’s like his photos, real and honest and lovely, and no one has ever done this before. So I let him kiss me. And I stop worrying because it’s just Miah and me, and there’s no hiding anymore, not even if I wanted to.</p> <p>“I’ve never kissed you here,” he says. “Or here.”</p> <p>...“Or here.” He kisses my forehead, and whatever happens with us, I know there will be at least one person in the world who has seen all of me.</p>
370	We have fields! Corn! Pigs! Meth! And more fields!
372	. Then he kisses me, and it’s just kissing. Nothing more. But somehow it means the most of all.
378	You were my first. Not just sex, although that was part of it, but the first to look past everything else into me.
379	<p>Him. Me.</p> <p>Me. Him.</p> <p>Us. Intertwined. Hands on my face, in my hair, trailing down my back, his fingers—soft as a cloud—on my skin, where no boy had gone before.</p>

Profanity	Count
Ass	14
Dick	4
Fuck	42
Goddamn	3
Piss	3
Shit	44