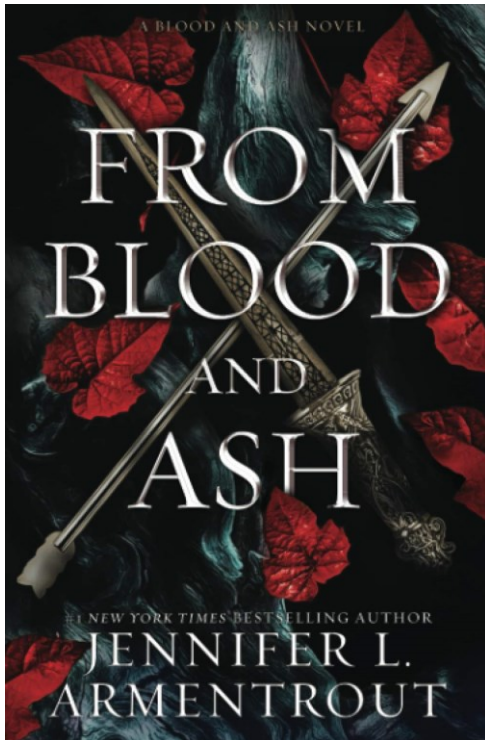


FROM BLOOD AND ASH



Adult

By Jennifer L. Armentrout

ISBN: 9781952457005

CONTENT WARNING

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Book Summary:

A powerful young woman learns about herself, love and deceit as she falls in love with her would-be enemy.

Summary of Concerns:

This book contains moderate profanity; violence; sexual activities; sexual nudity; alcohol use.

4 /5

Not For Minors
BookLooks Review Rating

Page	Content
22	<p>"Who wants to win me tonight?" Her voice was deep and smoky as she slid her hands along the waist of the frilly corset. "I can assure you boys, I will last longer than any pot of gold will." ..."Then it will be a far more entertaining night for me," she said drawing one hand down her stomach, slipping even lower to between her-</p>
26	<p>The left door led upstairs, to more private rooms where Britta had said all manner of things occurred.</p>
27	<p>Not because I planned to have sex now or next week or...ever, but because I wanted to be able to make that choice.</p>
28	<p>He was inspecting his cards, but his hand was where hers had been heading earlier, delved deep between her thighs.</p>
29	<p>"Some say that to dance is to make love." "I...I hadn't heard that." Slowly, I looked behind me. Through the curtains, I could make out the shapes of bodies churning in time with the music, their movements full of mesmerizing and fluid grace. Some danced alone, their curves and forms clearly outlined, while others...</p>
43	<p>In a matter of a few shuttering heartbeats, he was guiding us down, his grip strong but careful, as if he were aware of his strength. He came down over me, his hand still behind my head, his weight a shock as he pressed me into the bed, and then his mouth was on mine. Hawke kissed me. There was nothing sweet or soft, like I'd imagined a kiss to be. It was hard and overwhelming, claiming, and when he inhaled a sharp breath, he took advantage, deepening the kiss. His tongue touched mine, startling me. Panic flared in the pit of my stomach, but so did something else, something far more powerful, a pleasure I hadn't experienced before. He tasted of the golden liquor I'd once snuck, and I felt that stroke of his tongue in every part of me. It was in the shivers that erupted all over my skin, in the inexplicable heaviness in my chest, in that curling, tightening sensation below my navel and even lower still where there was a sudden, throbbing pulse between my legs. I shuddered, my fingers digging into his flesh, and suddenly I wished I hadn't worn gloves because I wanted to feel his skin, and I doubted I'd be in any shape to concentrate on what he was feeling.</p>
44	<p>"You are most definitely not who I thought you were," he murmured. "How did you know?" I blurted out. "Because the last time I kissed the owner of this cloak, she damn near sucked my tongue down her throat."</p>
54	<p>"What do you want from me?" he asked, toying with the small bow between my breasts.</p>
56	<p>"So, Princess, will you tell me what you want from me?" I took another uneven breath. "Anything?" "Anything." He moved his hand then, cupping my breast as he ran his thumb across the center. It was such a light touch, but I gasped as bolts of pleasure darted through me. My body reacted on its own, arching into his touch. "I'm waiting," he said, swiping his thumb once more and scattering my already</p>

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	<p>disjointed thoughts. "Tell me what you enjoy, so I can make you love it." "I..." I bit down on my lip. "I don't know." Hawke's gaze flew to mine, and such a long moment passed that I began to wonder if I'd said the wrong thing. "I'll tell you what I want." His thumb moved in slow, tight circles across a most sensitive part. "I want you to remove your mask." ..."No, Princess," he said, lowering his head until his lips brushed the neckline of my gown. "I want to really see you when I do this without your gown between you and my mouth." Before I could ask what he meant, I felt the wet, warm glide of his tongue through the thin, silken gown. I gasped, shocked by the act and by the rush of liquid heat it brought forth, but then his gaze lifted to mine as his mouth closed over the tip of my breast. He sucked deep and long, and the gasp turned to a cry that would surely embarrass me later. "Remove your mask." His head lifted as he slid a hand over my hip. "Please."</p>
57	<p>Hawke's hand slid down my outer right thigh to where the dress parted and stopped, right over the hilt of the dagger. "What the...?"</p>
58	<p>He took me back down to the mattress, his weight covering me once more, and he pressed into me in a way that caused all the interesting parts to meet. His mouth lined up with mine-</p>
104	<p>There wasn't even a second to react to his arm clamped around my waist, and he hauled me back against him. His other hand remained where it was, between my breasts. ...His grip tightened on my waist, and even in my all-too-limited knowledge of things, I knew what I felt against me.</p>
247	<p>"You're so incredibly violent." He paused. "I think I like it." "Let me go!" I seethed. "And be kicked or stabbed?" He shoved his legs between mine, preventing any future kicks. "We've already covered that, Princess. More than once." I lifted my hips off the wall, attempting to throw him off, but all I accomplished was pressing a very sensitive part of my body against the hard length of his thigh. The friction created a sudden, jarring rush of heat that was so powerful, it was like being struck by lightning. Sucking in a startled breath, I stilled. Hawke had done the same against me, his large body filling with tension. His chest rose and fell against mine. What...what was happening? I felt hot despite how far up we were and that we stood in the cold night air. My skin seemed to buzz as if fine currents of energy were dancing along my flesh, and hard, pounding heat had replaced the aching coldness in my body.</p>
311	<p>My cheeks had been scalded by the end of the first page, having discovered what occurs when someone kisses one not on the mouth or on the breast like...like Hawke had done before he knew who I was, but some place far more intimate.</p>
312	<p>But no, he was here, drinking whiskey by himse-</p>
319	<p>His fingers drifted from the mask and slowly traced the curve of my cheekbone. My skin hummed as his stare followed the path that his fingertips took. He glided them down my face and over my parted lips. I sucked in a sharp breath, my chest suddenly feeling too tight.</p>

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	<p>His chin dipped, and my breath caught as he lowered his head. Every muscle in my body seemed to tense with a heady mix of panic and anticipation. There was intent in the way his lashes lowered, and how he leaned in. He was going to kiss me. My heartbeat danced as his lips glided across my cheek, leaving a trail of fire in their wake. I knew what I should do, but I didn't. Maybe Hawke had been right when he'd said how I could have anything I wanted when, with a mask, I could pretend that no one knew who I was. He had to be.</p> <p>Because my eyes closed, and I didn't move. Hawke had been my first kiss, but if he kissed me now, this... this would be our real first kiss.</p> <p>He knew who I was now. He'd seen me unveiled. He knew.</p> <p>And I wanted this- wanted him.</p>
320	<p>My heart was pounding so hard as his fingers drifted to my chin. He tilted my head back, and I felt like I was falling. His mouth moved to my ear, and his warm breath sent hot tingles through me.</p>
328	<p>"Oh, you may not know what she means by manhood. I do believe she's talking about his cock. Prick. Dick. His-"</p> <p>"Oh, my gods," I whispered.</p> <p>"His- apparently- extremely large, throbbing and pulsing-"</p>
348	<p>The neckline wasn't as low as I'd seen some Ladies in Wait wear, and just the upper swells of my breasts were visible, but that...that was a lot for me, considering my normal gowns had a neckline up to the throat.</p> <p>...It took a few moments for my senses to zero in on what that was. It made me feel hot and...and achy. It felt like arousal.</p>
355	<p>His head tilted slightly, and his mouth opened as if he were about to say something, but then it closed. A moment passed, and he lifted his other hand, catching a strand of my hair. I sucked in a startled, sharp breath as a wave of shivers followed the glide of his knuckles across the bare skin above my chest. Those shivers didn't stop there. They traveled down to below my breasts and lower.</p>
359	<p>Before I knew it, I was sitting in his lap- his lap.</p> <p>"Comfortable?" he asked, and he sounded like he was smiling.</p> <p>I had no words. He was still holding my hand, and I was sitting in his lap, and all I could think about was that part in Willa Colyn's journal, where she described being in a man's lap. There had been less clothing-</p> <p>"You can't be comfortable." One of his arms folded around my upper back, pulling my side against his chest. "There. That has to be much better."</p> <p>It was.</p> <p>And it wasn't</p> <p>"I don't want you getting too cold," he added, his breath warm against my temple. ... "Is that what you're doing right now? Protecting me from the cold by pulling me into your lap?"</p> <p>"Exactly." His hand was against my side, the weight like a brand.</p> <p>I stared at what I thought might be his throat. "This is incredibly inappropriate."</p> <p>"More inappropriate than you reading a dirty journal?"</p>
361	<p>"Why? I think it's pretty obvious, Hawke. I'm sitting in your lap. I doubt that's how you normally hold innocent conversations with people."</p>

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	<p>"Very rarely is anything I do innocent, Princess. "</p> <p>"Shocker," I muttered.</p> <p>"So, you're suggesting I led you out here, instead of toward a private room with a beet' he dragged the tips of his fingers down my right arm—"to engage in a particular type of inappropriate behavior?"</p> <p>"That's exactly what I'm saying, though my room would 've been a better option." My heart had already started pounding the moment my rear ended up in his lap. Now, it felt as if it were going to explode out of my chest.</p> <p>"What if I said that isn't true?"</p> <p>"I. . ." My stomach fluttered as his fingers found their way to my hip. "I wouldn't believe you."</p> <p>"Then what if I said it didn't start off that way?" His thumb moved against my hip.</p> <p>"But then there was the moonlight and you, with your hair down, in this dress, and then the idea occurred to me that this would be the perfect location for some wildly inappropriate behavior. "</p> <p>"Then I. . .I would say that's more likely." His hand glided over the thin, gauzy material of the gown. "So, there you have it."</p> <p>"At least, you're honest." I bit down on my lip as the fluttering deepened.</p> <p>..."Tell you what. I'll make you a deal."</p> <p>"A deal?"</p> <p>"If I do anything you don't like... " Hawke's hand slid down my thigh, causing my breath to catch. Through the dress, his hand closed over the dagger. "I give you permission to stab me."</p> <p>"That would be excessive."</p> <p>"I was hoping you'd give me just a measly flesh wound," he added. "But it'd be worth finding out. "</p> <p>I grinned. "You are such a bad influence."</p> <p>"I think we've already established that only the bad can be influenced."</p> <p>"And I think I already told you that your logic is faulty," I repeated, closing my eyes as his fingers followed the outline of the sheathed blade.</p> <p>Another hot, tight shiver curled its way down my spine, and I had the sudden urge to squeeze my legs together.</p>
363	<p>"I heard you the first time, Princess. You're right. I could find someone who would be easier."</p>
367	<p>Before I had a chance to respond, his lips brushed over mine. I gasped at the soft contact, and I swore I could feel his lips curve against mine in a smile. I wished I could see it because it seemed like a full grin, the kind that lifted both sides of his mouth and made both dimples appear, but then he moved his mouth along mine, painstakingly slow as if he were mapping out the curve of my lips with his. I held completely still, my heart feeling like a trapped butterfly as he retraced the path he'd just made. Tiny shivers hit every part of my body. I trembled as my hands curled into the front of his tunic, no doubt wrinkling the fine material.</p> <p>This touch was barely a kiss, but gods, the gentleness, the sweetness of it shook me, rattled me to the core.</p> <p>Then Hawke tilted his head, increasing the pressure, deepening the kiss.</p> <p>Suddenly, everything changed. This kiss its rawness— left me breathless. Resulted</p>

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	<p>in both of us gasping when we parted, our chests rising and falling quickly. I couldn't see his eyes in the dark, but I could feel his penetrating stare.</p> <p>...Our lips touched again, and this time, there was no hesitation. There was just want, so much of it, and a hundred other powerful, forbidden things that pounded through me. His lips scorched mine, heated my blood, and set fire to my senses. His hands moved to my shoulders, sliding down my arms. Hawke shuddered, and a sound emerged from the back of his throat, sort of like a half-growl, half-moan. It sent little shivers of pleasure and panic darting through me as he parted my lips. The hunger behind our kiss should've scared me—and maybe it did a little because it felt like too much and not nearly enough all at the same time. I moaned as his hands drifted down my sides. It felt like my body was sparking, igniting</p> <p>He gripped my waist, lifting me and settling me again so my knees fell to either side of his hips with me pressed against him. His breeches and my gown served as no real barrier. I could feel him, and I shuddered as a sharp, pulsing ache throbbled through me. His answering moan, another deep, rough sound, shattered whatever hesitancy I had. I placed my hands on his chest, marveling at the way his body jerked as I slid them up over his shoulders and then around his neck. I did then what I wished I'd done at the Red Pearl. I sank my fingers into his hair, and the strands were as soft as I'd thought they would be. No other part of him felt that way. He was all hard heat against me.</p> <p>Hawke's arms moved around me, pulling me so tightly against him that there was barely any space between us. He kissed me again, kept kissing me, and I knew this was more than a kiss. It went beyond that, beyond how he felt and how he made me feel.</p> <p>...Instinct took over, guiding my body—my hips to push and roll—and he shuddered again, catching my bottom lip between his. He grabbed fistfuls of the skirt of my gown, lifting until his hands touched my calves. A tremor went through me like lightning.</p> <p>"Remember," he said against my lips as his palms glided up to the curve of my knees. "Anything you don't like, say the word, and I'll stop. "</p> <p>I nodded, seeking his mouth in the darkness. When I found him, I wondered how I'd made it this long without kissing him again.</p> <p>I wondered how I could go on without doing it more.</p> <p>That thought threatened to dampen the heat, but his hands were moving again, skimming over my skin and sending a rush of heated blood to every part of my body. I shifted forward until our hips were melded together. I moved. We moved. And I thought I whispered his name before I kissed him again, slipping my tongue between his lips, against his teeth-</p> <p>..."About stopping," he admitted quietly, drawing his fingers down my cheek and over my jaw. "I would stop, but I don't think you would stop me."</p> <p>"I'm not exactly understanding what you're saying." I let my eyes close. Despite being confused by his words and the fact that we weren't kissing, I liked the intimacy of how close we were, how his head rested against mine.</p> <p>He drew the tips of his fingers down the side of my neck. "Do you want me to be blunt?"</p> <p>...And then he kissed my temple, and I thought about the odd, ashy feeling that</p>

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	<p>had coated my throat. "I was seconds from taking you to the ground and becoming a very, very bad guard."</p> <p>...I should've felt relief that he'd stopped, and I did. But I also didn't. What I felt was a confusing mess. But I knew one thing for sure.</p> <p>"I don't think I would've stopped you," I whispered. I would 've let him take me to the ground, and I would've welcomed what he did, consequences be damned. Hawke's body shook as he moaned.</p> <p>"You're not helping." "I'm a bad Maiden."</p> <p>"No." He kissed my other temple. "You're a perfectly normal girl. What is expected of you is what's bad." He paused. "And, yes, you're also a very bad Maiden."</p> <p>Instead of being offended—because there was no way, even if I didn't count tonight, that I could deny that—I laughed and was rewarded by his arm coming back around me. Hawke pulled me back to his body, sliding his hand to my nape. I settled my cheek against his shoulder as his grip briefly tightened, and then his fingers moved, working the muscles of my neck. I wasn't sure how long we stayed there like that, quiet and hidden away under the willow, but I did know that it was far past the point where my blood had cooled, and my heart had slowed. I didn't move then, and neither did Hawke. I thought that maybe...maybe being held like this, so close and so tight, felt just as good as the kissing and the touching. Perhaps even better, but in a different way. But it was getting late, and unsurprisingly, Hawke was the responsible one. He kissed the crown of my head, causing my heart to squeeze in a way that was so sweet, it was almost painful.</p>
374	<p>Suddenly, they were as close as Hawke and I had been under the willow. "Another notch on your bedpost?"</p>
436	<p>"Enough to be wildly inappropriate with me." A pause. "On multiple occasions."</p>
441	<p>The hand that had been dangling in the air was suddenly flat against my upper stomach, startling me.</p> <p>My head jerked back around. "What are you doing?"</p> <p>"Relaxing you," he said, and all I could tell was that his head was dipped. "How is this relaxing me?"</p> <p>"Wait, and I'll show you."</p> <p>I started to tell him that he didn't need to show me anything, but then his hand began to move in slow, small circles. My mouth fell shut. Somehow, he'd gotten that hand between the folds of my blanket, through the cloak, and under the sweater to move against my thin undershirt. He moved those fingers in circles, first in small, tight ones, and then larger arcs until his fingers reached below my navel and his thumb almost brushed the undersides of my breasts. All he was doing was rubbing my belly, but it was new and different and it felt like...like more than that. A warm, shivery sensation radiated from his hand.</p> <p>"I don't think this is making me relaxed."</p> <p>"It would if you'd stop trying to strain your neck." Suddenly, his head lowered, and his lips touched my cheek. "Lay back down, Poppy."</p> <p>I did what he said only because of how close his mouth had been to mine.</p> <p>"When you listen to me, I think the stars will fall." He followed me down so he spoke just above my ear. "I wish I could capture this moment somehow."</p>

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	<p>"Well, now I want to lift my head again." "Why am I not surprised?" The sweep of his touch drifted lower, now below my navel. "But if you did, then you wouldn't find out what I have planned. And if I know anything about you, it's that you're curious."</p> <p>An answering warmth bloomed under his hand and spread lower. I sent a nervous glance to the guard. .I don't think this should happen. "</p> <p>"What is this?" His fingers brushed the band of my breeches, causing me to jerk. "I have a better question for you. Why did you go to the Red Pearl, Poppy? Why did you let me kiss you under the willow?"</p> <p>I opened my mouth, but his lips brushed the curve of my cheek, stealing my words.</p> <p>"You were there to live. Isn't that what you said? You let me pull you into that empty chamber to experience life. You let me kiss you under the willow because you wanted to feel. There's nothing wrong with that. Nothing at all." His lips coasted back up my cheek, sending a fine shiver over my skin. "Why can't tonight be that?"</p> <p>My eyes closed briefly and then reopened, fixed on the guard.</p> <p>"Let me show you just a little of what you missed by not coming back to the Red Pearl." "The guards," I whispered, and it wasn't lost on me that they were my concern. Not the gods. Not the rules. Not what I was.</p> <p>"No one can see what I'm doing." His hand moved, slipping down and between my thighs. I gasped as he cupped me through the pants that no longer felt thick at all. "But we know they're there."</p> <p>I could barely breathe around the sharp swirl of sensation that settled low in my stomach and made my chest feel heavy, achy.</p> <p>"They have no idea what's going on. No clue that my hand is between the thighs of the Maiden." His voice was a hot whisper as he pulled me back and pressed against me, causing another puff of air to escape my lips. My rear nestled into the cradle of his hips. He made a deep, rumbling sound that sent a flash of heat through me. "They have no idea that I'm touching you."</p> <p>And then he was no longer just palming me. He was touching me, rubbing two of his fingers over the seam of the pants, over the very center of me. A rush of damp heat flooded me. My gaze dropped, and I almost expected to see what he was doing under the blanket.</p> <p>I saw nothing in the darkness. But I felt everything.</p> <p>... His fingers toyed with the stitching, pushing in just hard enough that I felt the touch all the way to the tips of my toes. Every part of my body became hyperaware.</p> <p>How did he think this was going to help me sleep?</p> <p>I was wide-awake now, pulse pounding and heart crashing, and he was touching, rubbing me in a way that caused my hips to twitch.</p> <p>He dragged his hand up the front of the breeches. His palm brushed along the bare flesh of my lower stomach. Those long fingers settled over a throbbing point and moved in slow, steady circles. "I bet you're soft and wet and ready." His voice was a lush growl in my ear. "Should I find out?"</p> <p>I shuddered, half afraid that he would.</p> <p>Partly scared that he wouldn't.</p>

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	<p>The friction of his fingers, the rough material against my flesh...and his words... Oh, gods, they were decadent, purely sinful, and I never wanted it to end. "Would you like that?" he asked, and my hips rolled instinctively, seeking his touch. He made that sound again, that rumble of approval that was so raw and primitive. "I would do more than this."</p> <p>Eyes open only a slit, I watched the not-too-distant shape of one of the guards slowly patrolling the north-facing side of the camp, my skin and body flaming with forbidden heat as my hips moved again. This time, it wasn't only a reaction I couldn't control. I moved them purposefully, rocking them against that slow, steady circling of his fingers. I reveled in the spike of aching, biting pleasure that followed.</p> <p>I shouldn't allow this. Not even in the privacy of a room, and surely not where someone could just turn around. I imagined if they paid close enough attention, they'd know that something was happening. I was almost positive that the guard closest to us, the one I watched even now, was Kieran. He seemed as alert as Hawke.</p> <p>This was wrong.</p> <p>But how could it. . . how could it feel so right, then? So good? I was becoming a being of liquid, pulsing fire, all due to just two long, graceful fingers.</p> <p>"You feel what I'm doing, Poppy?"</p> <p>I nodded.</p> <p>"Imagine what my fingers would feel like with nothing between them and your skin." I shuddered.</p> <p>"I would do this." His fingers pressed in, a little harder, a little rougher, and my legs jerked. "I would get inside of you, Poppy. I would taste you. I bet you're as sweet as honeydew."</p> <p>Oh, gods.</p> <p>I bit down on my lip as my grip eased off the blanket. I reached down, placing my hand over his forearm. He stopped. He waited. Wordlessly, I lifted my hips to his hand as my fingers dug into his skin. The ache was becoming unbearable.</p> <p>"Yes," he breathed. "You would like that, wouldn't you?"</p> <p>"Yes," I whispered, forcing the word out past my lips.</p> <p>His fingers started moving again, and I almost cried out. "I would work in another finger. You'd be tight, but you're also ready for more."</p> <p>My breath was coming out in quick, shallow pants as I felt the tendons in his arm flex under my hand, as my hips moved in the same circles he was making against me.</p> <p>"I would thrust my fingers in and out." His lips brushed the skin just below my ear. "You'd ride them just like you're riding my hand right now."</p> <p>That's what I was doing, shamelessly so. Clutching his arm, I rocked against his hand, chasing that unbelievable tension that kept building and tightening.</p> <p>"But we won't do that tonight. We can't. Because if I get any part of me in you, every part of me would be in you, and I want to hear every sound you make when that happens. "</p> <p>Before I could even feel disappointment, before I could truly process the silky promise in his words, he shifted his hand lower, pressing his fingers against the very center of me while his thumb rolled over the part that throbbed. There was</p>

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	<p>nothing slow about his movements then. He knew exactly what he was doing with all that swirling, inescapable tension. Hawke shifted beside me, somehow, working his other arm under my shoulders. He hauled me flush against his front, and I was no longer just moving against his hand, but against him, the rolls of my hips erratic and sharp. Soft, low moans escaped my lips. I felt trapped, wonderfully pinned between his hand and the hard, unyielding length of his body. Something... something was happening. It was what his kisses and brief touches before had hinted at and promised. My body suddenly went as tight as a bowstring taking aim, and my lips parted a second before Hawke folded his hand over my mouth, silencing the moan I wouldn't have been able to suppress, His hot mouth moved against the side of my throat, his lips, his teeth. There was a wicked sharpness The tension broke. I broke. Pleasure whipped out, intense and sudden. It was like standing on a ledge and then being pushed over. I fell, shuddering in pulsing, throbbing waves, and I kept falling until the hand between my legs slowed and then stopped. I wasn't sure how much time had passed, or when Hawke's fingers slipped from my thighs or his hand eased away from my mouth. My heart was only beginning to slow when I became aware of his hand pressed against my stomach, and his arm curled around my shoulders, keeping my boneless body snug against his.</p> <p>I thought maybe I should say something but... what? Thank you seemed inappropriate. And I thought that it wasn't entirely fair that he had given me this, while I gave him nothing of the sort. Plus, I thought that I should probably look to see if Kieran or any of the other guards had noticed what Hawk had done—what we 'd done under the blankets, but I couldn't keep my eyes open. I couldn't get any words out.</p>
456	"But watching you fight them is incredibly arousing."
482	<p>Hawke wasn't the catalyst. He was the reward.</p> <p>I lifted my surprisingly steady hands to the sash. I didn't look away as I undid the knot. The robe parted and then slipped over my shoulders. I let it puddle at my feet.</p> <p>Hawke didn't look away for one second. He didn't even blink as he stared at me, his eyes locked to mine. Slowly, his gaze traveled the length of my body. I knew there was enough light for him to see everything. All the dips and swells, the shadowy, hidden areas, and all the scars. The jagged tears on my arms and across my stomach, and the ones on my legs that looked like wounds from sharp nails but were proof that I had been chosen by the gods.</p>
483	<p>Not when his gaze was slowly tracking back to mine. Not when he was looking at me as if he were soaking in every inch of me. I couldn't help but shiver when his eyes finally met mine.</p> <p>"You 're so damn beautiful," he whispered, his voice thick. "And so damn unexpected. "</p> <p>Then he moved in that way that always made it hard to believe he wasn't an Ascended. In a heartbeat, I was in his arms, and his mouth was on mine. There was nothing slow and sweet about the way he kissed me. It was like being devoured, and I wanted that. I kissed him back, holding onto him tightly, and just</p>

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	<p>when I felt the touch of his tongue against mine, he pulled away. Things became a blur then, His tunic came off with my help, and then his boots, and his breeches. I trembled at the first sight of him.</p> <p>He was... beautiful.</p> <p>All sun-kissed skin and long, lean muscles. His chest and stomach were defined by years of training, and there was no mistaking the power and strength of his body. There was also no mistaking how his life had left its imprint behind in the form of faint nicks and longer scars on his flesh. He was a fighter like I was, and now I truly saw what I'd been too nervous to notice before. His body was also a record of everything he'd survived, and the deeper, redder scar just below his hip on his upper thigh was proof that he likely had his own nightmares.</p> <p>...My gaze strayed, and my eyes widened.</p> <p>Oh, my.</p> <p>I bit down on my lip, knowing I probably shouldn't stare. It seemed indecent to do so, but I wanted to.</p> <p>"You keep looking at me like that, and this will be over before it starts."</p> <p>Cheeks heating, I dragged my gaze away.</p> <p>"I. . . you're perfect."</p> <p>His expression tightened. "No, I'm not. You deserve someone who is, but I'm too much of a bastard to allow that."</p> <p>I shook my head, unsure how he couldn't see that he was deserving. "I disagree with everything you just said. "</p> <p>"Shocker," he said, and then he curled his arm around me.</p> <p>In a heartbeat, I was on the bed, and he was above me, the rough hair of his legs abrasive against mine in the most surprising, pleasant way. But the feel of him against my hip caused a nervous swallow, and also brought a reminder of a very real consequence that could come from this.</p> <p>"Are you-?"</p> <p>"Protected?" His thoughts obviously following the same path as mine. "I take the monthly aid."</p> <p>He was talking about the herb that rendered both males and females temporarily infertile. It could be drunk or chewed, and I heard that it tasted like sour milk.</p> <p>"I assume you're not," he added.</p> <p>I snorted.</p> <p>"Wouldn't that be a scandal?" he said, skimming his hand along my arm.</p> <p>"It would." I grinned. "But this. . . "</p> <p>Those eyes met mine. "This changes everything. " It did.</p> <p>It really did.</p> <p>And I was ready for that.</p> <p>Hawke kissed me, and I wasn't thinking of anything beyond how his lips had an almost drugging effect. We kissed until my heart was pounding, and my skin hummed with the pleasure of it. Then, only when I felt breathless, did he begin to explore.</p> <p>His fingers trailed over every inch of exposed skin, and when his hand moved between my thighs, I cried out, quickly discovering that what he'd done with his fingers in the forest, over my breeches, was absolutely nothing compared to his skin against mine.</p>

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	<p>He worked his way down, using his mouth and then his tongue to follow the path his hands had blazed. He stayed in particularly sensitive areas, wringing sounds from me that made me briefly wonder just how thick the walls were, and then he lingered over the scars on my stomach, kissing them, worshipping them until I was sure that he didn't find them disturbing or ugly in any way.</p> <p>But then he moved lower still, past my navel.</p> <p>My heart stopped as I felt his breath against where I ached so fiercely. I opened my eyes to find him settled between my legs, his golden gaze locking onto mine.</p> <p>"Hawke," I whispered.</p> <p>One side of his lips curled up in a wicked, smoky half-grin. "Remember that first page of Miss Willa's diary?"</p> <p>"Yes." I would never forget that first page.</p> <p>Then, his gaze remaining on mine, he lowered his mouth.</p> <p>My back bowed at the first touch of his lips, and my fingers dug into the sheets at the glide of his tongue. I thought my heart might stop, that maybe it already had. The riot of sensations he conjured up seemed unfathomable until that moment. It was almost too much, and I couldn't hold still. I lifted my hips, and his rumbling growl of approval was nearly as good as what he was doing.</p> <p>Gods.</p> <p>My head fell back against the mattress, and I was aware that I was writhing, squirming, and there was no sense of rhythm behind my movements. But that sharp tightening deep inside me was coiling and twisting, and then it all unraveled, stunning me with its intensity. I might've said his name. I might've actually screamed something incoherent. I didn't know, and it took what felt like a small eternity before I could even open my eyes.</p> <p>Hawke lifted his head, lips swollen and glossy in the candlelight. The intensity in his stare scorched my skin as his gaze caught and held mine. He never looked prouder of himself as his mouth parted and the tip of his tongue glided over his lips. "Honeydew," he growled.</p> <p>"Just like I said."</p> <p>My breath caught, and I shuddered. He didn't so much move as he prowled up the length of my boneless form. I watched him, unable to look away as the hardness of his body caressed mine, unable to stop the shiver when the rough hairs of his legs tickled sensitive skin.</p> <p>"Poppy," he breathed, his lips touching mine. He kissed me, and my skin heated at his flavor, the taste of me and those strangely sharp teeth of his. My senses whirled at the feeling of him settling between my legs, prodding, pressing in just a bit. "Open your eyes."</p> <p>They had closed? Yes. They had. I opened them to see that one side of his lips was curved up, but the teasing tilt normally present was gone. He said nothing as he stared down at me, his hips and body still. "What?"</p> <p>"I want your eyes open," he said.</p> <p>"Why?"</p> <p>He chuckled, and I sucked in a gasp at how the sound felt with him so very close to where I throbbed. "Always so many questions."</p> <p>"I think you would be disappointed if I didn't have any. "</p> <p>"True," he murmured, dragging his hand down the length of my neck and then</p>

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	<p>lower.</p> <p>His hand curled around my breast.</p> <p>"So, why?" I persisted.</p> <p>"Because I want you to touch me," he said. "I want you to see what you do to me when you touch me. "</p> <p>A shiver danced over my skin. "How...how do you want me to touch you?"</p> <p>"Any way you want, Princess. You can't do it wrong," he whispered hoarsely.</p> <p>Uncurling my fingers from the sheet, I lifted a hand, touching his cheek. His gaze remained latched to mine as I drew my fingers along the curve of his jaw, over his soft lips, and then down his throat. I was still feeling too much for my gift to be remotely functional as I glided the tips of my fingers over his chest. His breaths pushed it against my hand, and I kept exploring, soaking in the feel of the taut, coiled muscles of his lower stomach, and the dusting of hair below his navel and then lower. My fingers brushed silky hardness, and his entire body jerked. I hesitated.</p> <p>"Please. Don't stop," he rasped, jaw clenched as his fingers stilled on my breast.</p> <p>"Dear gods, do not stop."</p> <p>I focused on his face as I touched him. There were so many tiny reactions throughout his entire body. His jaw popped, and his lips parted slightly. The lines of his face became sharper, and the tendons in his neck stretched as I curled my hand around him. He kicked his head back, and his large, powerful body trembled. I noted how rapidly his breathing had become as I slid my hand down to where our bodies were almost joined. He gave a full-body shudder then, and I was awed by how much my touch affected him. I tightened my grip, becoming more confident.</p> <p>"Gods," he growled.</p> <p>"Is this okay?"</p> <p>"Anything you do is more than okay." His voice had deepened even more. "But especially that. Totally that."</p> <p>I laughed softly, and then I did it again, drawing my hand up and down his length. His hips moved then, much like mine had, rolling against my palm, against me. He made a sound, a deep, dark rumble that sent a flush of pleasure through me.</p> <p>"You see what your touch does to me?" he asked, his hips following my hand.</p> <p>"Yes," I whispered.</p> <p>"It kills me." His head dropped, and those eyes... They seemed almost luminous as he stared down at me, and then his thick lashes lowered, shielding them from view. "It kills me in a way I don't think you'll ever understand."</p> <p>My gaze searched his face. "In a...in a good way?"</p> <p>Hawke's features softened as he lifted his hand to cup my cheek. "In a way I've never felt before."</p> <p>"Oh."</p> <p>He dipped his head, kissing me as he shifted onto his left arm. His hand left my cheek and slid down the length of my body until it was between us. "Are you ready?" Breath catching, I nodded.</p> <p>"I want to hear you say it."</p> <p>The corners of my lips tugged up. "Yes."</p> <p>"Good, because I might have actually died if you weren't. "</p>

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	<p>I giggled, surprised by the light sound in such a tense, important moment.</p> <p>"You think I'm kidding. Little do you know," he teased, kissing me again before he pushed in just a little bit. He stopped, making that sound again. "Oh, yeah, you're so ready." My entire body flushed and trembled.</p> <p>Hawke's gaze lifted to mine once more. "You amaze me."</p> <p>"How?" I whispered, confused. I'd done almost nothing while he...he shattered me with the kind of kisses I'd only ever read about.</p> <p>"You stand before Craven with no fear." He dragged his lips over mine. "But you blush and shiver when I speak of how slick and wonderful you feel against me."</p> <p>I was definitely flushing even more now.</p> <p>"You're so inappropriate."</p> <p>"I'm about to get really inappropriate," he promised. "But first, it may hurt."</p> <p>I knew enough about sex to know that. "I know. "</p> <p>"Reading dirty books again?"</p> <p>A flutter started in my stomach and spread.</p> <p>"Possibly."</p> <p>He chuckled, but it ended in a groan as he began to move.</p> <p>There was pressure and a moment when I wasn't sure how he could go any farther, and then a sudden, sharp sting stole my breath as I squeezed my eyes shut. Fingers digging into his shoulders, I tensed. I knew there'd be some pain, but all the languid warmth turned to chips of ice.</p> <p>Hawke stilled above me, breathing heavily. "I'm sorry." His lips touched my nose, the lids of my eyes, my cheeks. "I'm sorry."</p> <p>"It's okay."</p> <p>He kissed me again, softly, and then rested his forehead against mine. A shallow breath lifted my chest. That was it. I'd crossed the final, forbidden line. There was no shock of guilt or burst of panic. Truthfully, I'd crossed that line when Hawke had kissed me before knowing who I was, and everything that led to this very moment had slowly erased that barrier until it no longer existed. There'd been no going back since the night at the Red Pearl, and this...this felt too right for it not to be, in some way, destined.</p> <p>...I took a deep breath, and the burning lessened. Hawke remained still above me, waiting. Tentatively, I lifted my hips against his. It stung, but not as severely as before. I tried it again. Hawke shuddered, but he didn't move. Not until my grip on his shoulders loosened, and my breath caught for an entirely different reason.</p> <p>There was a burning friction, but it wasn't the same. Muscles low in my stomach tightened as a ripple of pleasure skittered through me.</p> <p>Only then did Hawke move, and he did so carefully, so gently that I felt tears prick my eyes. I closed them as I curled my arms around his neck, letting myself get lost in the madness once more, in the building crescendo of sensations. Some kind of primal instinct took hold, guiding my hips to follow his. We were moving together, the only sound in the room that of my softer sighs and his deeper moans. That exquisite, almost painful coiling sensation returned. My legs lifted of their own accord, curling around his hips. The pressure was building inside me once more, but it was more potent this time.</p> <p>Hawke worked his arm under my head and curled his hand around my shoulder as the grip of his other hand tightened on my hip. He began to move faster, deeper,</p>

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	<p>his thrusts stronger as he held me in place under him. I held onto him, my mouth blindly finding his as his hand slipped between us. His thumb found that sensitive area, and when his hips churned against mine in tight circles, the tension exploded once more. I cried out as the sensation whipped through me, more intense and biting than before. The release he'd given me earlier somehow felt like nothing compared to this. I was shattering into pieces in the best possible way, and it was only when the last wave seemed to have crested that I became aware of those intense golden eyes fixed to my face as he slipped his hand out from under me. I knew at once he'd been watching the entire time, and a breathy moan left me.</p> <p>I placed a trembling hand on his cheek. "Hawke," I whispered, wishing I could put to words what I'd just felt—what I was still feeling.</p> <p>His features turned stark, and his jaw tensed, and then he...he seemed to lose whatever control he had left. His body pounded against mine, moving us across the bed. Under my hands, his muscles flexed and rolled, and then his head kicked back, and he cried out, shuddering.</p> <p>He dropped his head to mine, to the sensitive space along the side of my throat. I felt his lips against my thrumming pulse as the roll of his hips slowed. There was a scrape of his teeth that sent a shiver through me, and then the press of his lips.</p>
495	<p>Stretching my limbs, I pressed my lips together at the strange, dull ache between my legs. I didn't need the reminder of last night, but there it was.</p>
531	<p>Impatience brimmed just under the surface as he stalked toward me, basket in hand.</p> <p>"Would you rather I get on my knees?"</p> <p>A terrible razor-sharp smile pulled at my lips as I started to agree-</p> <p>"I don't mind." His gaze dropped as he bit down on his lower lip. "Doing so would put me at the perfect height for something I know you'd enjoy. After all, I'm always craving honeydew."</p>
568	<p>He was inside me.</p> <p>I felt out of control, just like the night in the Blood Forest, and when we were in the room above the tavern.</p> <p>My chest suddenly ached and became heavy, but it wasn't from pain, lack of air, or coldness. No. It was like when Hawke had touched me, when he'd stripped me bare and kissed me- kissed me everywhere. I felt loose. My insides tingled, just as my skin hummed. Razor-sharp lust pulsed straight through me, dark desire that burned.</p> <p>...Biting down on my lip, I tasted his blood and moaned, closing my eyes.</p> <p>"Hawke?" He made a sound, and maybe he said something, but it was indecipherable.</p> <p>I stretched, taking quick, shallow breaths. The coarse shirt and breeches scraped my skin and the sensitive, hardened tips of my breasts.</p> <p>...There were a lot of things I shouldn't do or say, but everything in me was focused on the way my entire body burned and throbbed with need. My hand moved, sliding up my stomach, over the ruined, clawed shirt, to my breast. Guided only by instinct and need, I closed my fingers over the shivery flesh, molding it to my palm. An aching shudder worked its way through me.</p>

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	<p>"Poppy," Hawke ground out. "What are you doing?"</p> <p>"I don't know," I whispered, back arching as I stroked myself through the thin, worn shirt. "I'm on fire."</p> <p>"It's just the blood," he said thickly, and instinct told me he was watching me, and that made me all the hotter. "It'll pass, but you should... you need to stop doing that."</p> <p>I didn't stop. I couldn't. My thumb rolled over the pebbled hardness, and I sucked in air. It reminded me of what Hawke had done, but he'd used more than just his hands. I wanted him to do that again. An intense, pulsing ache between my legs twisted my insides. Hips shifting, I pressed my thighs together, but that didn't help. The pressure only made it worse.</p> <p>"Hawke?"</p> <p>"Poppy, for the love of the gods."</p> <p>Heart thrumming, I opened my eyes, and I'd been right. His gaze was fixed on me—on my other hand, the one that had a mind of its own and was slipping down my stomach.</p> <p>"Kiss me?"</p> <p>Taut lines formed around his mouth. "You don't want that."</p> <p>"I do." My fingers reached my waist, where the breeches gaped. "I need it."</p> <p>"You only think that right now." His face cleared, and there was no mistaking the way his features had sharpened. "It's the blood."</p> <p>"I don't care." The tips of my fingers brushed the bare skin below my navel.</p> <p>"Touch me? Please?"</p>
570	<p>A nervous flutter filled my stomach. His words...they should infuriate me, but I...I wanted him, and thinking was...well, it was all I ever did. I didn't want to do it anymore.</p> <p>"I don't want you to be good." Without even realizing it, I had lifted my other hand, fisting the front of his shirt. "I want you."</p> <p>"...But when I'm deep inside you again, and I will be, you won't be able to blame the influence of blood or anything else."</p> <p>I stared at him, some of the fog of lust lifting from my mind as he lifted my hand and brought it to his mouth.</p> <p>...The tingling was fading from my skin, but the ache of unspent desire was still there. Not nearly as all-consuming as minutes before, but the part of me that felt like it was starting to wake up knew he spoke the truth.</p>
572	<p>Inconsequential things like little comments he made here and there, bigger things like how he'd silenced me when in called out his name the night we...the night we made love.</p> <p>...And we hadn't made love. He'd fucked me.</p>
580	<p>A new ache erupted inside me, heating my blood until it felt like every part of me was filling with molten lava.</p> <p>My wide eyes were unseeing as the heat filled my chest, my stomach, and pooled in the space between my thighs. His mouth tugged on my throat once more, and this time, that pull went straight to my very core. My body jerked with a flood of pounding arousal.</p> <p>He groaned, his arm tightening around me, and I felt him, hard and thick against</p>

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	<p>my rear. I gripped his arm as tension coiled inside me Without warning, he ripped his mouth from my neck. He let go, and I stumbled forward, nearly falling. Trembling with confusion and the desire still sparking inside of me, I turned to him.</p>
581	<p>His mouth crashed into mine as one hand shoved into my hair, his other arm clamped to my waist. I wasn't just kissed. I was devoured. I tasted my blood on his lips, on his tongue. I tasted him. I wasn't sure exactly when I kissed him back. Was it after a few seconds, or had I been kissing him from the moment his mouth touched mine? I didn't know. All I did know was that I was starved for him, right or wrong, I wanted him. That's why I didn't fight him when he brought me to the ground. The contrast of the cold snow against my back and the heat of his body pressed to my front drew a gasp from me. I didn't think he heard it as it was caught up in his hungry kisses, and I realized then that he'd been holding back when he kissed me all the times before. Now, he wasn't hiding who he was. He rocked against me as he slid his hand over my waist to my hip. We moved, straining and gasping. His teeth caught my bottom lip. A brief sting registered, and he shuddered, groaning as the metallic taste renewed. Breaking the kiss, he lifted up enough to look down at me. "Tell me you want this." His hips were still churning against mine. "Tell me you need more." "More," I whispered before I could even think about what we were doing, what we'd done—who he was. "Thank fuck," he grunted, and then he reached between us, his finger snagging the front of my breeches. He pulled on them hard enough to lift my hips. Buttons popped free, flinging into the nearby snow. "Goodness," I murmured. He barked out a short, harsh laugh as he shoved my pants down until one leg was completely free, and the breeches snagged on the other ankle. "You know this shirt was beyond repair, right?" The sound of cloth tearing was my only explanation. I dipped my chin, seeing my breasts. He was staring too, his hand tearing at his own breeches as his eyes tracked the streaks of blood dried along my stomach, moving over the hardening tips of my breasts.</p>
582	<p>Then I wasn't thinking at all. He kissed me as he settled over me, between my legs, and then things... spun. There was no slow seduction this time, no long and drawn-out caresses and kisses. There was a pinch of discomfort, but it quickly gave way to the aching, pulsing pleasure, and there was no room in my body or mind or between us for there to be anything other than what we felt. It was just him and me, the taste of my blood and his on our lips, and this need I didn't quite understand. Around us, the snow fell heavier through the trees, soaking his back and my hair as we clutched and grasped at one another. There were only the sounds of our wet kisses, our bodies coming together and parting, and our moans. One long, dragging kiss ensued, and then his mouth moved from mine to my chin and then lower, his lips and those sharp teeth gliding over my throat. His actions elicited a shiver that curled its way down my spine as he stilled above me. Was he.</p>

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	<p>. . was he going to bite me again? Instead of fear, there was a rush of wicked heat. The pain from his fangs had been brief, and what had come afterward...</p> <p>I squeezed his shoulders, too lost to even wonder if I shouldn't want him to, too far gone to think about the consequences if he did.</p> <p>I felt his tongue against my skin, circling and laving over the sensitive mark he'd left behind. Then he lifted his head. I saw his eyes long enough to see that his pupils had constricted before his lashes swept down, and his mouth was on mine once more. And then he was moving again.</p> <p>His hips retreating and then pushing back in, rolling and grinding as his fingers played with my breast. He moved slowly now, so lazily that I felt as if I were being strung out. I shuddered under him, slipping my hand into his snow-damp hair. The tension was building again, coiling until I couldn't take his slow, measured movements any longer. His teasing grinds and rolls. I lifted my hips, trying to urge him to move faster, go deeper, but he held back until I cried out and pulled at his hair.</p> <p>He half-laughed, half-growled as he lifted his head. "I know what you want, but. " Heart racing out of control, I squirmed under his weight. "But what?"</p> <p>"I want you to say my name."</p> <p>His hips continued moving in maddeningly slow circles. "I want you to say my real name." My lips parted on a sharp inhale.</p> <p>He stilled once more, his eyes luminous.</p> <p>"That's all I ask."</p> <p>All he asked? It was a lot.</p> <p>"It's acknowledgement," he said, his thumb swirling and tugging. "It's you admitting you are fully aware of who is inside you, who you want so badly, even though you know you shouldn't. Even though you want nothing more than to not feel what you do. I want to hear you say my real name."</p> <p>"You're a bastard," I whispered.</p> <p>One side of his lips curled. "Some call me that, yes, but that's not the name I'm waiting to hear, Princess."</p> <p>I wanted to deny him. Gods, did I ever.</p> <p>"How bad do you want it, Poppy?" he asked.</p> <p>My grip tightened on his hair as I yanked his head down. There was a flash of surprise in those glowing eyes. "Bad," I snarled. "Your Highness. "</p> <p>His mouth opened, but I lifted my legs, curling them around his hips. Taking advantage of his surprise and tapping into my own anger, I rolled him onto his back, fully intending to leave him there, but I hadn't foreseen what the move would do when I rocked back— I sank down on his length, my body shockingly flush with his. My shout ended in his groan as I planted my hands on his chest. Gods. The fullness was almost too much. "Oh," I whispered, taking ragged breaths.</p> <p>His chest was moving just as unevenly under my hands. "You know what?"</p> <p>"What?" My toes curled inside my boots.</p> <p>"I don't need you to say my name," he said, his eyes half closed. "I just need you to do that again, but if you don't start moving, you might actually kill me. A startled giggle burst from me. "I. . .I don't know what to do."</p> <p>Something about his features softened even though stark need shone through the</p>

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	<p>thin slits of his eyes. "Just move." His hands went to my hips. He lifted me up a few inches and brought me back down. A deep sound radiated from him. "Like that. You can't do anything wrong. How have you not learned that yet?"</p> <p>I wasn't sure what he meant by that, but I mirrored his movement, moving up and down as snow fell across his shirt. My palm slipped, angling me forward. A spot deep in me was touched, sending out bolts of intense pleasure in waves. "Like that?" I breathed.</p> <p>His hands tightened on my hips. "Just like that."</p> <p>With each move of my hips, that spot was touched, and more streaks of bliss shot through me. Before I knew it, I was moving faster above him, and I knew he was watching me as my eyes drifted closed, and my head fell back. I knew his gaze was fastened on my breasts and where we were joined, and that knowledge was too much.</p> <p>The tension whipped out, shattering me. I cried out as I shuddered, body spasming as intense shards of ecstasy sliced through me.</p> <p>He moved then, rolling me back under him and thrusting his hips against mine. His mouth claimed mine as his body did the same, pounding against me, into me until the pleasure seemed to crest once more, the fierceness shocking as he seemed to lose all sense of control. His large body moved over mine, in me until he pressed hard against me, his shout swallowed in our kisses as he shuddered.</p> <p>I didn't know how long we lay there in the falling snow, our hearts and breaths slow to steady, my grip still tight on his shoulders, his forehead pressed to mine. After some time, I became aware of his thumb moving along my waist in idle up and down sweeps.</p>
588	I thought about how I felt when he was in me, moving inside me.

Profanity	Count
Ass	4
Bitch	4
Cock	1
Dick	1
Fuck	10
Prick	1
Shit	10