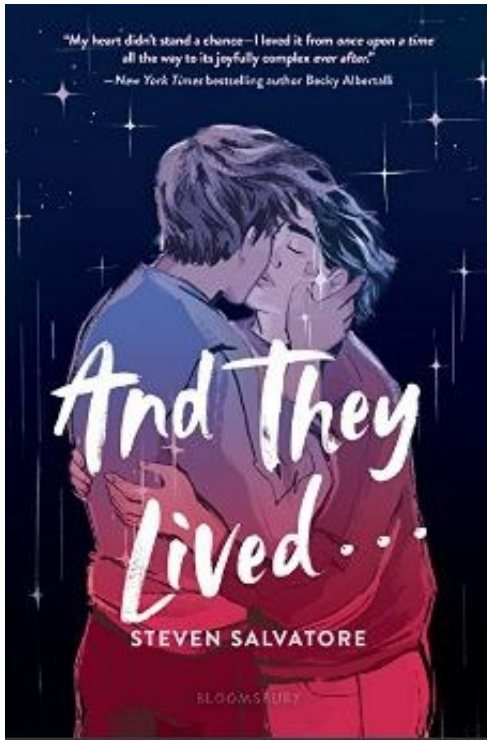


AND THEY LIVED...



Young Adult

By Steven Salvatore

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CONTENT WARNING

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Book Summary:

A young college man discovers more about himself and his sexuality after having a romantic relationship with another man.

Summary of Concerns:

This book contains profanity; alternate gender ideologies; alternate sexualities; sexual nudity; obscene sexual activities; controversial cultural, political, and racial commentary; and self-harm including bulimia.

4 / 5

Not For Minors
BookLooks Review Rating

Page	Content
0	<p>page v</p> <p>To every queer person who grew up never seeing themselves in fairy tales but still dreamed of being swept off their feet in a Technicolor love story: this is for you, go find your adventure</p>
2	<p>"You should make a move."</p> <p>My face heats. "Taylor!"</p> <p>Mom goes silent. Then, "You know to use protection, right?"</p>
7	<p>"Please make sure you wear protection when you have sex. I left a box of condoms under your pillow- I didn't know your size, so I guessed a sensible average- and I also got you some lubricant because they told me at Planned Parenthood that for, you know, it's not naturally..." She motions with her hands and finally says, "Wet."</p>
10	<p>When I casually brought up the fact that I'm gay in the suite group chat, all three of my future roommates- Aaron, Xavier, and Benigno- were super cool about it, though Benigno was fairly quiet, which makes me glad I didn't bring up that I also think I might be nonbinary. Or genderqueer; I'm not sure. I haven't figured it out, untangled all the ways I feel slightly different than every other guy I know, and I definitely haven't figured out the whole pronoun question, which, why can't I just be he and him and nonbinary? Either way, it'd be my luck that Benigno ends up being a super straight-cis-dude-bro who is queerphobic and has a chiseled body.</p> <p>...You're broken, the voices say, fat, ugly, not nonbinary enough, and-</p>
12	<p>There's lots of handsy behavior on both of our parts, and we talk to each other like we're in some low-budget BDSM porn about to get it on. But she's very much a girl, and I'm very much into guys. It's our friend fetish.</p>
12	<p>"...I never agreed to such a thing, and this past week without seeing your face has left me feeling a ferocious void the likes of which not even my boyfriend's ginormous cock can fill."</p>
16	<p>When I yank it open, I see them: the Prince Naveen and Kristoff dolls, still glammed up, still half-naked and abtacular, looking like queer gods in their own fairy world.</p>
18	<p>I may not be a smart girl who reads (gasp!) in an ass-backward patriarchal town, but I am a queer person in a hot-pink T-shirt with an image of a shirtless Prince Adam (the human version of Beast) on a Grindr dating profile with the screen name B_My_Guest alongside the caption Prince in the Streets, Beast in the Sheets.</p>
21	<p>"You really need to stop watching bondage porn," I whisper as the doorknob twists.</p>
22	<p>This is the person I'm going to be sharing a room with.</p> <p>At least he's gay.</p>
23	<p>He has a few posters that I help him hang- one of Ariana Grande that he had planned to say he jerked off to if any of the guys questioned him (then do the sign of the cross so she'd forgive him for such blasphemy), and two of his favorite movies, Clueless and The Godfather.</p> <p>...When we're finished, he spots my half-naked prince dolls.</p> <p>"Ohmygod, this is so kinky," he says, grabbing Naveen and running his fingers over the abs and getting lost in the doll's eyes. "This reminds me, should we, like, develop a system for when we're hooking up?"</p> <p>..."Like, me with a guy, you with a guy. Like a sock on the knob or something."</p>
24	<p>"Are you planning an orgy?"</p>

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27	"I mean, our capitalist culture tells us we have to buy bathing suits just to go swimming when underwear, which is like, a fifth the price of a cute Andrew Christian bikini, exists."
32	He's in the animation program, too. Or is it they? I never can remember pronouns. ...I don't even know what pronouns I feel comfortable using. Maybe he. Maybe they. Maybe something else entirely. Right now, I'm comfortable with he.
34	His leg brushes against mine. "I prefer people who don't beg for the spotlight or misgender folks."
37	I want to ask Jack not to laugh at my red bird underwear as I slip off my shorts. I cover my crotch with one hand, half out of fear that I'll pop a boner and half because I'm worried that he'll judge the size of my bulge.
43	Now I'm picturing him jerking off, and dear god, I have to stop because I'm getting a boner in Jack's shorts.
44	"Don't take this the wrong way, but you just said a whole lot of stuff by dead, straight, white people, mostly men. Ever thought of diversifying?" His cheeks turn a shade of crimson that makes him looke sunburnt. "I, uh, yeah. Absolutely. Recommendations?" I sit down on the chair at his desk; it's the only thing not draped in dirty clothes. "James Baldwin, bell hooks, Janet Mock, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Elizabeth Acevedo, Roxane Gray, Toni Morrison, Angie Thomas, Tomi Adeyemi, N.K. Jemisin. Off the top of my head."
46	It's my dream to be the gay twenty-first century Mary Blair, whose psychedelic poparty drawings still inspire Disney animation.
48	"Taylor, my sister, is twelve, and I'd die for her." ...My dad is pretty awesome, He owns a whiskey distillery, and I've pretty much been drinking the stuff since I was my sister's age. My mom hates it, but she goes along with it because, if you know my dad, you can't really say no to him."
50	That little freckle under his right nipple kept me up last night. Jack's probably not even gay or bi or pan.
53	But being naked in front of a room full of strangers, even if they are learning and not treating you like a Pornhub clip, is horrifying.
59	"Like, the way the witch is an allegory for how society treats LGBTQ-plus people," Leila continues.
64	Maybe that's because there are so few nonbinary animators out there. ...I didn't know Professor McPherson is nonbinary. Fuck, I've been referring to the as she in my head. My cheeks heat when I realize I'm now assuming that the professor uses they/them.
65	"It's okay to do that?" I ask. "Use she/her, even though you don't identify solely within that binary?"
65	"You asked me how I knew I was nonbinary." she says. ..."I don't know what normal is. I don't know what pronouns I want to use. Right now, I feel most comfortable with he/him, but maybe that's just a comfort thing. I don't even know if I like the term nonbinary, because it's like, I do sometimes feel like I exist within the binary, but it's not stagnant, you know? More fluid, like genderqueer, which is a term I think I like. But...I don't know."

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66	"For now, if you want me to use he/him, I will. If that changes, tell me." ..."Can I be nonbinary and use he/him?"
71	"Yes, please, god! I can't stay here while Xavier and Aaron parade around shirtless. I mean, the gall of these hot men with their...exposed...nips!" He fans himself.
77	"Seriously. Who knows if he's gay or gay-adjacent or bi or pan or whatever, but he's definitely into you."
93	The girl sitting next to her, who commented on my story, chimes in, "Tropes are a luxury of the majority. And LGBTQ-plus and Black, brown, and Indigenous folks should get to use these tropes because, for people like us, they're not tropes. They're just never-told stories or stories told over and over and over again by the majority." "The white majority," her friend next to her adds.
97	"I watched that interview you did with The BuzzWord before class today, and you used they/them pronouns. ..."Sorry, I mean, I've been using he/him lately. I did use they/them for a while. I'm just...not sure. But you can use either. I like either."
106	"Ah, good sir- err, what's a gender-neutral term for sir?"
130	The hazy air inside reeks of skunky pot and sweat, and the lights are low, giving the room a distinct club vibe.
131	"It's time for y'all to get drunk! Go into the kitchen! We have jungle juice in the big Gatorade cooler, beer in the fridge, and some harder stuff on the counter..." ...I see her before I hear her, but it takes my brain a few seconds to process Leila leaning against the counter nursing a cup of jungle juice, talking to Benny, Rhett, and Xavier of all people, before she screams, "Rae!"
132	Benny slowly walks over to me and hands me a cup of jungle juice. I down it in one gulp and shiver from the horrible, bitter taste.
138	"I'm gay."
139	His mouth opens, and mine does the same until his tongue brushes mine. I pull back just enough to nibble on his bottom lip, which elicits a primal moan, and he moves his hand from my shirt to my face, caressing my cheeks, then to the back of my head, pulling me toward him, chasing me, making my body shudder.
146	Leila was the first person I came out to as gay freshman year in high school, even though Rae and I were closer. It was easier because she always called herself "a gay man in a woman's body" and boasted about how "all the Instagays love my Insta content, yaaasss queen!"
147	Because the fact is, she's not a gay man, so she's appropriating what doesn't belong to her. Granted, this isn't something only Leila does- many straight white girls co-opt queer culture like fashion accessories when it suits them but stay silent when we talk about the actual struggles of being queer. It's like we're only worth our meme value and only when it fits into a binary: Acceptable versus Everything Else.
148	He still doesn't know I'm binary. ...A few years later, when we were seniors, and I started mining my gender identity, exploring terms like nonbinary or genderqueer or genderfluid, and rejecting heteronormative gender labels, I didn't feel the need to pronounce that to anyone.
148	Suddenly I was being interviewed by The BuzzWord and having to talk about what it means to be nonbinary, even though I didn't understand it myself.

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154	<p>Luckily, I only walked in on them having sex in our room once.</p> <p>...Because apparently, my super cute graphic tees with cartoon characters don't scream "Fuck me!"</p> <p>It doesn't matter that I've told both of them I'm not trying to wear anything that would scream "Fuck me!"</p>
157	<p>"It'll be okay. We're just three hot gays on the hunt for chicken tendies, and if we happen upon a certain Gus Kenworthy- looking binch, then the power of our coven shall protect you. But honestly-"</p>
159	<p>I drink whiskey with my father it doesn't matter that I'm not legal</p>
165	<p>"You drive me crazy, Chase." His fingers, matching the tremble of his voice, snake up the hem of my shirt, and I gasp. He leans his forehead against mine and exhales, his breath traveling down my face. When his hands leave my stomach, my body bucks, yearning for more.</p> <p>"You're so goddamn sexy, you have to know that I..." His voice is low, grumbly, but steady now as he moves to undo the last of the buttons on Xavier's shirt. He starts kissing my neck, and I close my eyes and tilt my head back hard against the stone, which must knock some sense into me because suddenly, I'm very aware of where we are and what he's doing.</p> <p>...His fingers hook onto the belt loops of my jeans. "I've waited my entire life for you, and yeah, it seems like I'm moving at Mach 5, but in my head, in the fairy tale I've told myself to help me sleep, I've been with you this whole time."</p>
166	<p>Jack kisses the tip of my nose then squeezes my hand before smoothing the wrinkles in his shirt and adjusting his dick so it's not visibly hard; I do the same.</p>
167	<p>Back in our suite, Benny and Xavier find me frantically typing "I have exactly fifty minutes to learn everything about the mechanics of gay sex because our education system failed me, and gay porn is overproduced, help" into Google. They shut the door and take turns Vanna White-ing an assortment of lubes, dildos, and condoms. Xavier busts open a shoebox filled with more elaborate sex toys, silicone prostate massagers, and now my head is too airy. I'm going to pass out from the combo pack of the information deluge and my embarrassment at being woefully unprepared.</p> <p>Even though I've been jerking off to gay porn for forever and have seen many a thread on Reddit about prepping for anal, I'm overwhelmed by the possibility of actually participating in "getting dicked down," as Benny keeps saying.</p> <p>Isthisreallyhappening?</p> <p>Noticing my hyperventilation, Benny says, "You're such a little Virg. Don't worry, you don't have to go penny; there's lots of other stuff you can do."</p> <p>"Penny?" I ask.</p> <p>"Penetrative," he says incredulously.</p>
168	<p>He sniffs me. "No, but a little freshness goes a long way. And, uh, you trim the hedges, right?"</p> <p>..."...Sex, especially penny, is worth the wait." He winks.</p>
169	<p>He holds up a plastic bag from the school bookshop, and my heart drops because he's clearly expecting sex- what else could be in the bag except for condoms?</p>
171	<p>"...Make it a little romantic. And maybe"- he kisses me- "do some more"- he kisses me again, his tongue wedging between my lips- "of this." He nibbles my bottom lip.</p>

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174	<p>His gaze travels to my chest then to my stomach. The way he looks at my body makes me feel completely naked. He moves our hands to the bottom of my belly.</p> <p>"Can I?" he asks.</p> <p>I want him to touch me, but what if I'm not enough? What if he thinks I'm just a misshapen potato not worthy of the peel?</p> <p>Pushing aside the negative thoughts, I nod quickly.</p> <p>He lifts the bottom of my shirt, exposing my flesh.</p> <p>His warm hand grazes my skin, fingertips dancing lightly across the layer of hair that covers my belly, and I tremble, slowly loosening the muscles in my back.</p> <p>"Can I?" he asks again, motioning to the buttons.</p> <p>I barely get out a breathless yes.</p> <p>Taking his time, he slowly undoes each one, pausing to look up at me and make sure I'm comfortable. When he gets to the center of my chest, he presses his palm in the space between my pectorals and lets out a measured breath. We maintain eye contact as he finishes the last button, and his hand moves gently to my collarbone. His touch lingers, lightly tracing the bone as the side of his hand pushes the fabric to the cliff of my shoulder.</p> <p>As the shirt falls to the floor, his eyes travel the length of my body with something more than just hunger in his eyes. I'm breathing heavily as he bites his bottom lip, and his hands travel down to my nipples, then around my midsection, finally wrapping around my back. I brace myself for his inevitable disgust, but it doesn't come.</p> <p>"You are a work of art." He hums low.</p> <p>In the moment, I believe him.</p> <p>He cranes his neck to kiss me soft and quick, but the second our lips mesh, he grabs me and pulls me close. His lips eagerly attack mine.</p> <p>We fall back onto his bed, and suddenly I'm on top of him, wedging his legs open with my thighs. He pulls me down, chest on hard chest, and his fingers run through strands of my hair.</p> <p>I'm impossibly hard, and there's no way to conceal it, but so is Jack. I feel him poking into my stomach, and I instinctively buck my hips into him.</p> <p>He hooks both legs around my back, and his fingers paw at my shorts. I want him to go further, but it's like we both realize at the same time that we're about to enter unexplored territory. We're both breathing heavily. My mouth hovers in the space between his lips and nose, his hot breath making me weak and heightening every one of my senses at once. His strong grip in my hair loosens, and I roll off him, falling back onto his pillow.</p>
175	<p>"I haven't jerked off since the night of the Years & Years show."</p> <p>"You jerked off that night?" I ask.</p>
179	<p>"...How do I know if they're cool or if they're MAGA hat-wearing bigots? Or worse, secret MAGA hat collectors."</p>
180	<p>I shift down on the bed to get a little pillow action, which makes Jack stir. He moves, and I feel him hardening against my leg. I push against him, causing him to press his pelvis into me until he's rocking back and forth. He looks up from my chest and into my eyes, and my breath hitches as his fingers walk down my stomach, hovering at my waist, tooling at the elastic band of my shorts.</p> <p>"Wait," I stammer.</p> <p>He picks his head up, almost reading my mind, our gazes never breaking.</p> <p>"I want to make you cum," I say.</p>

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	<p>"Are you sure?" His breathing is shallow, and his whole body shivers as I kiss him to steady his lips.</p> <p>I pivot so my body faces his, and I reach under the band of his shorts. His hair is coarse and untamed. I hesitate at the base—once I grab it, there's no turning back.</p> <p>Jack reaches down and quickly shucks his shorts then nestles back beside me. My breath snags as I stare at it, so long and girthy. It dances as his chest rises and falls. It's soft and strong, a strained muscle that throbs in my loose grip. I grab the lotion on his bedside dresser and warm it up in my other hand before I continue. His body bucks as I bring him closer and closer to the edge. His toes curl, and he presses the back of his head into his pillow before clawing at my chest. As his moaning increases, his lips find their way to mine, and he's kissing me, his tongue lapping at mine, which sends him over the edge, and he explodes on his chest.</p> <p>Panting, he looks down at me, hooks his finger into the elastic band of the shorts he gave me to wear, and commands, "Take off my shorts."</p> <p>I love the forcefulness of his voice, and I don't hesitate to obey.</p> <p>He reaches for me and starts, slow at first, appreciating its form the way a sculptor might a marble statue. I let out a moan so loud, he laughs.</p> <p>He lulls me to ecstasy, staring into my eyes.</p> <p>On the brink, I hear a faint whisper: "I love you."</p>
184	<p>"Witches can be extremely powerful feminist symbols, but it does feel as if you're relying a bit on sexist, puritanical stereotypes, at least in your renderings here."</p>
185	<p>"What if she's a drag queen?"</p> <p>..."The People Below the Skies see her as less than because she exists outside gender norms..."</p>
187	<p>Jack: six inches, a bomb in my hand. Licked lips trip wires. Disarm me.</p>
198	<p>"Ladies, are we decent?" Benny's voice echoes through our door.</p> <p>Definitely not. My dick is totally in Jack's hand when Benny follows up with a knock on our door. Jack shoots up off my bed in a panic, like he got caught watching gay porn by his mom right before church.</p> <p>...Jack keeps his head down so nobody sees his face. As it turns out, he is a tad prudish when he's not horny.</p>
199	<p>I don't answer because I'm distracted by the very loud, headboard-banging sex sounds emanating through the wall from Xavier's room.</p>
201	<p>"This binch writes you poetry and whispers rogue 'I love yous' as he makes you cum with those strong hands. You're living a gay fairy tale. Who cares if he has demons? We all do. We're gay."</p> <p>..."This smells like your man, you dirty slut."</p> <p>..."I got this at the school's clinic a few days after X and I found you googling 'how to have sex.'"</p> <p>In a grand flourish, he reveals a series of pamphlets that say:</p> <p>So You Want to Bottom?: Tips to Receiving Anal Sex Safely</p> <p>How to Be a Thoughtful, Safe Top.</p> <p>But the one that catches my eyes is:</p> <p>When You're Ready to Have Sex.</p> <p>"You go to the clinic?" I ask.</p> <p>"Girl." Benny's glare pierces me. "X and I go all the time. I got tested for STDs before I came</p>

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	<p>here, post-Rhett, and I hadn't hooked up with anyone until X. But he still insisted we get tested before we fucked. Now that we're hooking up with other people, we go together, like, every other week."</p> <p>"Wait, who are you hooking up with?"</p>
202	<p>"Sweetie, if you can't talk to me about sex after you saw me fully splayed out like a Thanksgiving turkey getting stuffed, how are you going to have it?"</p>
203	<p>Ignoring him, I continue, "And I found a box of brand-new condoms, lube, and a fancy anal douching kit in a toiletry bag right in the top drawer of his desk. It was just, like, right there." ...For the next two hours, Benny gives me the whole extensive rundown that includes safe douching, which foods to eat and which to stay away from, maintaining proper hydration, PrEP and different lubes, poppers, and dildos, breathing techniques, and explicit descriptions of rimming and fingering. He sing-talks about how and says it's important to "see it, like it, want it, and get it, but also prep for it."</p> <p>I walk out when he gets on his bed and mimics various positions.</p>
204	<p>Do I tell him, "I want to bottom for you. I'm starting to prepare mentally because this feels like a monumental undertaking, no pun intended, but I'm ready for the dick?"</p>
205	<p>"Should we get tested? I've only ever been with one girl. And not even full-on sex. Just fingers-"</p>
206	<p>The questions they asked about sexual activity were the hard part because, holy shit, it's so embarrassing to tell a relative stranger that you've only jerked off your boyfriend and haven't done anything more.</p>
217	<p>"Shut up and draw me." He unzips his jeans and, with one quick motion, shoves both jeans and boxer briefs down to his ankles.</p> <p>..."How do you want me?"</p> <p>What a loaded question!</p>
219	<p>He's already incredibly hard, and when I reach for him, he pulls back and smirks. "Not yet." He's on his knees and unbuttoning my jeans then he's tugging at them with a ferociousness I've not seen yet from him. Once I help him shimmy them down my ankles, Jack gets to his feet and straddles me, settling on top of me with his sturdy thighs. His arms brace themselves against the back of my chair, and he grinds against me as he leans in for a kiss so wet and forceful, it sends shock waves through my body, like if he pulls away, I'll stop breathing entirely.</p> <p>When he does pull away, my head dips into his shoulders by his armpits, which smell of his cologne. I kiss and nuzzle the soft fleshy spot between his pecs, and he pulls me to his body with one hand as the other snakes underneath to the strain in my briefs. I run my hands through his spiky blond hair, grabbing a handful of it, making him grunt.</p> <p>His upper lip curls into something more than a smile. He's in full control, a titan or a god with the power to destroy and reshape me. Dismounting, he lifts my shirt up over my hair and tosses it to the ground, and then his lips are on my neck and then my chest, following the trail of dark hair down to my stomach, where his soft lips linger, kissing in a circle around my belly button.</p> <p>Then he looks up at me expectantly.</p> <p>Maintaining eye contact, his fingers hook around the elastic of my briefs, and he pulls the fabric down slowly until I spring up.</p> <p>He takes a deep breath and grabs the base, and I close my eyes as his tongue gently closes</p>

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	<p>the gap between us. Then his mouth encircles me, and he goes down, but it's a mess of scraping teeth and Hoovering.</p> <p>"Babe, slow down, don't suck, watch your tee—ow!" I remember everything Benny told me. I relay Benny's instructions, and Jack's a fast learner because—"Holy fuck . yes!"</p> <p>I brace myself on the chair as my hips buck beneath him.</p> <p>My breathing increases rapidly as my body tenses. My legs straighten, and he grabs hold of them, now comfortable with only his lips and a glint of determination in his eyes.</p> <p>In one quick motion, he ventures down to the base, and my toes curl. He gags and starts laughing, mouth still full, cheeks beet red as sweat beads his brow. I don't want to cum quick, but all I can focus on is Jack, the most beautiful man I've ever seen.</p> <p>One of his slick hands travels farther down, and he applies a light pressure as his lips do something new that makes me feel like putty in his hands.</p> <p>I grab the arm of the chair. "Babe, I'm gonna I'm gonna—</p> <p>But Jack doesn't pull up, and his resolve gets stronger. He works his neck, which sends me over the edge. I let out a loud moan I hope doesn't echo into the empty halls.</p> <p>He licks his full lips, which look plump and red, and kisses me hungrily as he straddles me again. We press into each other, and I taste myself on his lips.</p> <p>"My turn," I whisper, pushing him off me and onto the desk, legs splayed out before me like some sort of religious painting, all hard brushstrokes and bursting colors and golden rays of heaven, the artist's hand heavy on the canvas.</p> <p>Grabbing hold of him, feeling every hard inch of him between my lips, I am both spectator and subject, artist and patron, worshipping at the altar of the divine.</p>
227	<p>"You don't want to swap blow job tales with your mom?..."</p>
229	<p>Part of me is drawn to exactly that: a secure man comfortable enough with himself to know who he is within the binary.</p>
250	<p>Benny flashes us his phone: You coming tonight? Free booooooooooze</p> <p>...Chloe comes over with a bottle of vodka and tips it into Benny's mouth, then Sof's, then mine, giving me more than the others.</p>
252	<p>I should let him squirm like he did after he told me he loved me weeks ago during peak orgasm and never even acknowledged it.</p>
253	<p>He undresses me slowly, never breaking our gaze.</p> <p>He lays me down on his extra-long twin and wedges himself between my legs, lifting the bottom half of my body. My legs wrap around him as he dips to kiss me. It's not aching and hungry but slow and deep and passionate. As our lips and tongues move together in a choreographed dance, his hand moves downward. Spit and fingers spread me open, slowly, little by little, one by one until I'm gasping for air in between kisses. Sliding down, he uses his tongue for the first time. My back arches.</p> <p>He reaches for the lube and a condom. As he towers over me, body slick with sweat already, I close my eyes.</p> <p>"Go slow," I whisper, sucking in a breath.</p> <p>He pushes against me, shoving the tip inside with a pop.</p> <p>I let out a yelp. "Slow!"</p> <p>"Sorry! Are you okay?" He leans down to kiss me softly, and my body relaxes.</p> <p>I exhale, and he slides deeper inside me, enough so that I convulse, a confusing swirl of pain and unbridled pleasure.</p>

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	<p>"Should I stop?"</p> <p>"No," I beg. "Just hold steady for a sec." Breathe in.</p> <p>Relax.</p> <p>Feel him, his weight, his power, his control.</p> <p>Breathe out.</p> <p>I open my eyes, and the soft lines of Jack's face are all I see, and it's enough for me to let go and let him in. I nod, and he goes deeper, and my eyes roll.</p> <p>"I love you so much," he groans.</p> <p>He's so close, closer than he's ever been before, sharing my body in ways I never dreamed were possible, and the faster he goes, the more I hope this never ends. After this, I can't go back to living and breathing and walking around without him inside me.</p> <p>I don't have to ask him to hold me, to kiss me, because he does, and we move together as one, twisted up in his bedsheets, Jack a veritable god as he moves his hips with assured precision. I scream in ecstasy, my body shivering with a fullness I've never felt before, and it's almost too much to bear as I bite down on my bottom lip and my head gets light. He grunts as his brows furrow. I clutch his back as he finishes then collapses onto me, shaking, his arms jellied as they try to prop him up and fail.</p> <p>He picks his head up and kisses the tip of my nose. "My turn."</p> <p>"Really?"</p> <p>He barely smirks before I roll over on top of him and pin his arms to the headboard. I gently kiss the space between his ear and his neck.</p> <p>His legs open for me, and at first, I do what Jack did, but an animal fervor leads me down farther, using my tongue to get him ready. Instantly, he moans, and it's so primal that it makes me go harder.</p> <p>"I need you, please," he begs. "Fuck me."</p> <p>There's something about the way he bites his bottom lip, the same lip I've kissed maybe hundreds of times now, that makes me want to know every square inch of him, mind, body, and soul. I thought before, when he was on top, that I could never feel closer to him, but now, as I stare into the ocean of his eyes as I enter him and his body trembles as his fingers grip my arms, this is a whole different level of intimacy.</p> <p>As I find my rhythm, I can't help but whisper everything that's in my heart, exquisite paintings I can't verbalize as anything but "I love you, I love you, I love you."</p>
258	<p>Losing my virginity should've been the most magical moment of my life.</p> <p>...Callum yells back, "You were both naked with another dude. You gay or something?"</p>
259	<p>Callum: "So you're a fucking fag?"</p> <p>...Callum: "For fuck's sake, Jack, you're hooking up with that fat kid and, what, I'm supposed to pretend like it's no big deal."</p>
269	<p>"As long as he doesn't come back a lib. Or a queer."</p>
271	<p>"...Tell me that I'm just a fat kid you're hooking up with..."</p>
281	<p>Even if I'm around friends, I feel alone. Hollow. A voice that can only be filled with food, which slides into more depression and more laxatives, more chronic exercise, more, more, more just feel more, more, more than nothing.</p>
283	<p>"...And Jack said nothing. After I told him about my body dysmorphia."</p> <p>...When I can exhale, I tell him about the scene in the dining hall with Benny and how he confronted me about purging.</p>

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284	"I just don't want to be in pain anymore. From Jack, from the eating disorder I've had on and off since high school, and the body dysmorphia I've pretty much always had..."
287	<p>"So you also question your gender identity? Talk to me about that."</p> <p>"It's not like something that's always on my mind, but yeah. I reject the gender binary. And I don't know if I like the terms nonbinary or genderfluid. Genderqueer seems to fit best, but that also feels very nebulous, especially because, like, some people think genderqueer means transgender because those terms get lumped together. Some genderqueer people are trans, and some aren't. Sometimes because of this I just feel very invisible, you know? Like technically genderqueer and nonbinary fall under the trans umbrella, but I'm not trans. I know that much for sure. But we don't have language for that nuance, really, and I spent a lot of time trying to define myself: If I'm questioning my place within the binary, does that mean I'm not necessarily cis? Maybe. But maybe not. Is it an either/or thing? Is it just another binary?"</p> <p>Dr. Sweatervest nods. "What do you think?"</p> <p>I shake my head. "When I came out as nonbinary, even though I wasn't ready to do so—something I created went viral, and it just sort of happened—I ended up losing a best friend who started talking about me behind my back."</p>
288	<p>"I'm not going to make you look into the mirror because of your body dysmorphia. But I remember you mentioning having sex with Jack and the way he made you feel about yourself and your body. Was his validation important to you?"</p> <p>..."Because if the guy you're having sex with says you're sexy, that's a boost to the ego."</p> <p>..."Did he ever invalidate your gender identity?"</p>
299	"You know," Benny adds. "There's a reason why I didn't come out to you two"- he looks to Xavier and me- "and Aaron on the group chat over the summer. Even though this is a queer liberal paradise of a college, you just never know."
303	<p>The more I get to know them, the safer I feel around them, and the more comfortable I feel baring my soul. With a little help from some pot, of course.</p> <p>On Thanksgiving Day, I'm not over their house for five minutes before Sofia dangles a ziplock bag of mossy weed and a small handblown glass bowl with pink and yellow swirls. "No shoptalk tonight. Only mellow fun times. You down?" she asks, and I nod. "Chlo, load him up." She gently tosses the bag and the bowl at Chloe.</p> <p>..."Oh, the shit that kills you?" Chloe sucks her teeth. "This is the only way to smoke unless you have a joint, but that takes too long. This is way healthier."</p> <p>Sofia chuckles. "Just don't pull too hard. We've seen many a rookie pull so deep, they end up violently coughing and blowing all the pot onto the ground. "</p> <p>Chloe instructs me on how to place my lips on the mouthpiece while holding one finger over the vent, lighting with my free hand, and sucking in the smoke from the embers. "You're gonna cough, so hand the bowl over gently. If you drop it, I drop you."</p> <p>"She's not kidding," Sofia adds. "Here, I'll help you." She holds it and lights it for me. The lighter flicks and ignites the grass for me, and I pull too gently.</p> <p>"I didn't get anything," I say as a tiny wisp of vapor escapes my lips.</p> <p>"Don't be shy. Suck harder," Sofia commands.</p> <p>"That's what he said," I say with a smirk, and they laugh. She places the bowl to my lips again, and I inhale deeply like I'm gasping for oxygen. It burns as I trap it in my lungs.</p> <p>"Hold it," Sofia says, ripping the bowl away from me and sucking down any remaining smoke from the embers.</p>

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	<p>I can't hold it any longer; I feel like my lungs are about to explode. I gag as an endless white cloud streams from my mouth, and I cough uncontrollably.</p> <p>"You're gonna feel that," Chloe says, grabbing it from Sofia once she gets a hit. She holds the smoke inside and slowly lets it seep from her nostrils.</p> <p>...We pass around the bowl until it's kicked, and I don't really feel anything aside from my lungs burning.</p> <p>Until I super feel it.</p> <p>I'm transfixed on the two couches, and a memory of Taylor and me as kids swells.</p>
306	<p>"...I'm a peanut butter cookie with crushed Oreos and chocolate sprinkles kinda girl. And they come warm and gooey, and I swear it's better than dick."</p> <p>...I hear my therapist's voice in my head telling me to be vulnerable and open up to my new friends in ways I'm too afraid to about my eating disorder, but I'm high, so that voice is drowned out by: Get a giant-ass cookie.</p>
310	<p>"Look at us. We are three beautiful people. Thick and curvy and delicious. Black, Columbian, and queer queens who have let this shitty world take power from us."</p>
343	<p>"I'm a proud nonbinary animator, and I hope you enjoy my world."</p>
352	<p>We were watching old sci-fi alien movies, the kind where cockroach-shaped creatures burst out of humans' stomachs, and we accidentally stumbled upon some unblocked porn channels. The girls looked so plastic, and the guy was more into himself than her.</p> <p>...paint.</p> <p>"But Cal had his hand down his pants, and I went to the bathroom to splash cool water on my burning face. Once Cal got off, we went outside and played a game called Gladiator, where we'd balance on this stone ledge on the side of his house and battle each other; the first one to push the other off won. He always won, but not that day.</p> <p>...He called me a fag and slammed me to the ground against the ledge. Searing pain shot through my shoulder, and burgundy blood oozed like a chemical spill on my chest. I passed out.</p>
361	<p>"I think I wanna tell the Witch's story. Who doesn't love a misunderstood drag queen?..."</p>
365	<p>In reality, I was suffering from severe depression and battling body dysmorphic disorder (BDD).</p>
366	<p>As I got older, my body-image issues worsened, and the body dysmorphia became so extreme that I resorted to laxatives and more extreme crash diets that caused drastic and unhealthy weight fluctuations, including starving myself and compulsively over-exercising.</p>
367	<p>Additionally, I've always had a complicated relationship with gender. A lifetime of pain and the suppression of my own queerness until I was twenty-three prevented me from fully mining my gender. It took me until I wrote my debut novel, <i>Can't Take That Away</i>, to pick apart and explore the layers of my own genderqueerness.</p> <p>...I am a proud gay, genderqueer person,...</p>

Profanity	Count
Ass	9
Bitch	3
Cock	1
Dick	4
Faggot/Fag	1
Fuck	35
Shit	37