

RAISING WOMEN

an interactive novel

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Do not read *Raising Women* from beginning to end. Instead, you will find that from time to time you'll be asked to make a choice. This is because the story is powered by your decisions.

Through your choices, you will experience challenges that a host of irresponsible characters present to you as a sixteen-year-old girl in the Midwest. When you make a decision, follow the instructions to move to the designated page to continue reading.

This book gives you the opportunity to read it over and over, learning new secrets about the characters and understanding how different experiences impact your story.

In this interactive novel, you have twenty-four possible pathways with four unique endings to explore the wild that is growing up girl. Good luck.

YOU AND ROMAN ARE TWO GIRLS eating donuts you grabbed from the self-serve station at the grocery store while you walk around, window shopping for things you'll never buy. Roman has pink frosting and sprinkles smeared across her bottom lip as she picks up a pair of combat boots with the hand that's not holding the donut. You stop, she looks them over, then drops them on the floor – not where she grabbed them from – and keeps going.

Sometimes you forget that Roman is actually a woman.

She's twenty-one or twenty-two. You met her at a gas station where, out of nowhere, she leaned herself against your car at the pump and asked you where you buy your hair dye. Her hair was pulled straight back. Tied with one of those twist ties that come on the plastic bread bag. You just told her you don't. "It's natural." She told you it's beautiful.

She introduced herself. She was eating Cheetos out of a bag. Had orange fingers. She licked her fingers clean and tried shaking your hand.

She asked you about your favorite band. Then she asked you what you'd sing at karaoke night. You don't sing, so you were not sure. She told you she'd sing Duran Duran's "Hungry Like the Wolf" and asked again what you'd sing. You thought

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of “Smells Like Teen Spirit” because Nirvana played right before you got out of your car. You wouldn’t sing that though, because the real lyrics sound like misheard lyrics. They don’t make sense. Then she told you you’d go out and sing that together sometime soon.

Roman’s charismatic.

She told you that you’d been at the pump for a while and asked if you were done yet. You didn’t know how to tell her that you finished pumping five minutes ago. Instead you asked how she got there. She laughed. Her laugh is contagious.

She got into your car.

She told you almost immediately that she’d just recently gotten out of prison. Not that long ago.

This didn’t really matter to you though. Roman didn’t feel threatening, even after knowing she’d been released from prison. She felt exciting.

Without you even asking, she told you that her jail time was for possession. She let her words sit for a moment, left you there on a cliffhanger and, like a joke, she finished the punchline. For possession, *and intent to distribute 500 grams or more of cocaine.*

She told you that was silly. She was never going to distribute it. That would have meant giving it all away.

But it got her thirty-six months in the slammer.

You hadn’t been looking for a friend, but you never had much of a choice in the matter either (once Roman decided something, that was it). Maybe she knew something you didn’t.

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So now she's loitering aisles with you. This has been a frequent pastime as you get to know each other. She's always got something she needs to grab.

You place the last bite of donut in your mouth as you pass the milk aisle. Rows of whole milk, 2% fat milk, skim milk, soy milk. Roman has told you soy milk doesn't even need to be refrigerated before it's opened. It has a shelf life unopened of up to one year. You both keep walking, browsing. You pass the alcohol aisle. Pass the cleaning supplies. Pass the jewelry. It's like some sort of domestic roadshow.

You pause just a minute to stare at a diamond ring enclosed in the glass case and Roman slaps your arm.

She tells you things aren't real.

Nothing you see really exists, she says. Roman is full of advice.

You ask how. Why.

She says reality is never the same. It's always changing so how are things like rings real then if they aren't changing like reality does. She adds that reality is something we make. She picks a scab off her knuckle and lets it bleed. She's got a few more scabs up her arms.

She hasn't cut her long, dirty blonde hair for at least three years and it flutters against her cheekbones as the wind from someone walking by blows it around.

"You've got something on your lip," you say to her. She licks the frosting and thanks you.

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When you first met, you asked her how long she'd been out of prison for. She told you she didn't know. Now you don't even know how long ago that was.

She did tell you, though, about how the government wants to be in your life, but not because they care about you. They just want to control you. They're like your parents. They don't give a shit, it's all about control and how they look.

Yes, of course it hurts.

She said that when they told her in prison that her time was up, she was free, there was no plan in place for where she'd go. She was just supposed to. Go, that is. Somewhere. Anywhere.

That's one of the ways people create reality, by letting the things they don't like leave their peripherals. Then it no longer exists.

To exist means to be acknowledged in some way. This is why you throw decomposing meat, moldy sourdough, and snot-dried tissues in the trash. Someone will take it somewhere else, a place you don't have to see, and then it's gone. That's how that works.

The prison pushed her out their doors and into their peripherals. They said go. She served her time.

So is she even real?

Her boobs vibrate. She digs her fist into her wife beater and pulls out a phone. It's the man who picked her up from prison calling her. He's asking where she's been.

She's not sure

She's sorry.

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Maybe she knows,
But she might be wrong.

She couldn't find her way back.
She will be there soon.

She promises.

Yes, her promise means something.

Last night was an accident.
Sorry – the last three nights were accidents.

The phone died. She needed a charger.

She found a charger.

Now it's alive.

She can come home.

Xoxo.

She pulls two suckers from the shelf closest to the exit and shoves them and her phone back in her bra.

Since you've met, she's been on and off living with a guy who told her to get in his car when prison let her free at two o'clock in the morning. She didn't really have any other option. Besides, he had a dry nose and a blood stain above his mouth. Just how she liked it.

Roman's nose has a cluster of salted freckles around it. They might be real, they might be tattoos, you don't know, but she scratches at them constantly.

She glances sideways at you and raises her thumb up to your mouth so she can wipe some sprinkles off your top lip. You don't ask if you're going to pay for the donuts. The alarm does not buzz when you leave.

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You're only sixteen.

She asks you, "Can I take you to the church I stayed at last night?" Which really means she's asking if you'll take her to the church she stayed at last night. She doesn't have a car. She can't drive, so you're the one who takes you two around.

She just got out of prison and now she needs something like a mother. You need something else.

You consider telling her yes (turn to page 7), or no – you two could just go back to your place (turn to page 13), or that you'll drop her off halfway since the halfway point is on your own way home (turn to page 17).