

Book Review: All the Things We Do in the Dark by Sandra Mitchell

PARENTAL ADVISORY EXPLICIT CONTENT

SEXUALLY EXPLICIT CONTENT AVAILABLE AT TEXAS INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICTS



NORMAL PEOPLE DON'T INTRODUCE THEMSELVES like this, I know. But the scar's right there. It's the signpost that whispers with scandal. It says, Guess what happened to her.

These days, I wear one pair of underwear and whatever I feel like over them. I dye my hair into rainbows and cut it into sharp, short angles; the bob edge traces my cheek, the color glimmers. It makes people look away, at least at first, from the scar. But I'm telling you so you don't have to guess.

What happened was bad enough; the guessers like to embroider. Sickos, seriously.

Also, I'm saying it because I think I have a responsibility: I had a "good" rape.

The kind where I was young enough that it was definitely not my fault. I was not sexy enough for people to think I might have secretly wanted it. My rape was committed by a psycho-stranger-bad-man-not-anybody-nice-we-know.

Extremely not my fault.

Book Review: All the Things We Do in the Dark by Sandra Mitchell

Of course, it is never anyone's fault.

I just have a story that liars and cheats and skeptics and haters of girls can't argue with. There's no world, no planet, on which a nine-year-old should learn about **sex and syphilis in an emergency room** while an intern glues her face back together.

I'm obligated to say it out loud for everyone who can't. For the ones who don't have bulletproof stories even though we're all equal: something evil happened, and it happened to us. We didn't make the evil happen.

Without the scar, maybe I wouldn't tell my story. It's not exactly a choice: the scar says I have to. That's what introduces me. No matter where I go—to school, to camp, no matter how ordinary-average I am or pretend to be—I'm that what happened to her?! girl.

Don't back away; don't be awkward. God, I'm so awkward. I say, "It was all right. What about you?" "Pretty good," she says cheerfully. "Got my license, finally!" "Yay!" "Right?" Her smile blazes bright, a blush darkening her cheeks. "And Dad finally let me get a job outside of his office. That was kind of amazing." "Oh yeah? Where at?" "The library; I'm a page. It's not super exciting or anything. I don't have a desk, but I don't have to listen to the **drunk** tank the whole time, either." I forgot that Hailey's dad is a cop. A detective, actually. Somewhere in time, I'd known it, and when she mentions it, the thin glass cracks and memories squeeze through. *My mom closed the door between me and her; she stood on the front porch and talked to Officer Cho. He was the first. Then came the many; how many cops does it take to get to the center of a disaster? His face doesn't float up from the murk. There were too many uniforms and too many people and just too many everything, to be specific. But he's connected; one stitch in my scar.* I bet Hailey knows all about it. Or maybe not. Or maybe? I have to cut off the loop in my head, or this is all I'll think about all afternoon. I should deploy another thought. One from the present, one that is pleasant. I wonder what kind of job Hailey had at the police department.

Book Review: All the Things We Do in the Dark by Sandra Mitchell

Was it a real job, or was her dad keeping an eye on her? Because he knew what happened to me. Because he saw. *New thought, Ava!* A new job, she's happy, so I celebrate with her. For her, I guess. I hear my lips say something dumb: "Woo hoo, freedom!"

When I wake up at 3:32 a.m., I roll over to see snow falling beyond the dark glass. It comes down in fluffy, cotton ball puffs. They're too fat to swirl, but the wind shifts them as they fall. An angle to the left, an angle to the right, they flicker like pixels. On the bedside table, my phone vibrates, its facedown screen suddenly glowing. That was what woke me up, had to be. I don't want to unfold and stretch an arm outside the covers. I'm lying in the perfect position. I'm so exquisitely comfortable, I feel like an ancient queen arrayed for beauty and power. I have those moments, sometimes. Where I'm so possessed in my body that I almost feel like a god. It never lasts more than a moment. The phone vibrates again. Now I reach for it. **I was a bitch before. I'm ovulating and I have a big-ass cyst and it hurts. Anyway yeah. hmu if you want a ride in the morning.** Syd's voice is in my head now. I let it press at the tender spots, the ones she left earlier with jabs and claws and confusion. There's still an ache there, but the spot that wants everything to be normal and okay is bigger. It wraps around her words and turns them into an apology, one that I accept. **NBD**, I tell her. No big deal. A lie like her apology: forgiveness that isn't but is. **It's snowing again and I'm out of the way. So?** she says. It's a statement with a question mark. **Okay, see you in . . .** I look at the clock on my phone. **Ugh, 3 hours. kk.** Now silence, for so long the screen dims. From the corner of my eye, I see motion. It's just snow, I'm sure of it, but I look just in case. And there, in my window is her face. That's why we all look up when Syd sweeps in. She has keys and tiny bells and other dangly, jangly things sewn to her jacket. Each step is a song, a merry whisper, and seeing her come toward me is like a light. A brightness right in the middle of my chest, the possibility of . . . What? Salvation? Hope? A whole new escape, I don't know. It just feels good to see her walk toward me. Like, I want to jump up and hug her and hide in all her familiarity. I turn in my chair; my chair doesn't turn with me. It traps me in the carrel so I half rise, then fall back down when Syd arrives. "So are you still on the rag or

Book Review: All the Things We Do in the Dark by Sandra Mitchell

what?" . . . I don't realize I'm yelling in the library until it's already happening. A torrent of fury spills out, magma rolling inexorably through my words. I couldn't stop them if I tried. I don't even want to. "Are you done being a jealous bitch?" Syd rears back. Her brows fly sky high, ash-blond against the blue of her curls. "Oh, you did not." "Oh yes I did," I say. "Because that's what this is about, right?" "I don't even know what 'this' is, Ava!" I bend my fingers back so fast counting that they hurt. "Your attitude, your mean-girl texts, your kidding-not kidding—" "How about your"—she mirrors me, mocks me, counting with her fingers— "attitude and lies and screw-Syd-I've-got-a-girlfriend bull—" "Ladies!" barks the librarian. She shoves herself to her feet and starts toward us. This isn't a silent library, but it's quiet. Usually, people don't scream in each other's faces.

The girl doesn't stare at me. Not because her eyes aren't open; they are. But there's a bloody black line where the whites should be; I can't make out her iris or pupils. This makes her silence a special kind of still, unnerving and ominous.

All those things people say at a funeral (*she looks so peaceful, she looks just like she's asleep*) aren't true.

Not here. She's (*been violated*) miserably empty. She's (*cut deep but no scar, she's never going to have a scar, a scar is something that healed*) dead. Just dead. Fumbling to dial—anger, humiliation, fear—and **god**, I know what comes next. When I push that panic button, when I call 911, the sirens will come. Men, probably men, with heavy shoes and heavy belts will tower over the spectacle. Looking past this girl's body, the young cop will key the mic on his shoulder and say, "Yeah, dispatch, we've got remains down here. Caucasian female, late teens, early twenties." Around and around her body they'll circle, ravens looking for scraps. They won't touch her. Neither will the detectives, although they might poke her with the end of a pen to see if there's anything under her. They might chat. Heat ghosts will trail off their cups of coffee; they'll talk about the weather. As though she isn't *right there* beneath them. The pop and whine of a flash will fill the scene. A strobe light for a murder rave, zooming in on her bare skin and her wounds and her vulnerability—the camera never blinks. Here comes the coroner; she'll touch. She'll get a couple guys to help her roll the body. On her count—one, two three—onto a flattened gurney, into a black body bag.

Syd turns on the radio, then talks over it. "I'm not trying to make you mad—" "Never a good start," I interrupt. "I just want to know what the deal is with Hailey." My **god**. She's actually wound up about this.

Book Review: All the Things We Do in the Dark by Sandra Mitchell

Syd's proud face is a little softer this morning. Her voice is, too. It's a statement but not a demand. I buy my cats a macaron pillow to sleep on. Cute kitties sleeping on cute cookies. Is there no end to the high-grade kawaii I can mainline with this game? Rubbing my lips together, I say, "There's no deal, Syd. I dropped my glove, and she gave it back to me." "And she drove you home." "No, she drove me into town, which I told you." I'm nitpicking, but it's all in the details. "I walked home." Shocked, Syd exclaims, "What the what?!" "It's really not that far," I say, rearranging furniture so more cats will visit me. Nothing bad happens in Neko Atsume. Even when the cats bring something dead, like a cicada skin, it's in the most adorable fashion possible. At the stoplight, Syd drapes her wrists over the wheel. "It's far." "It's really not that far," I repeat. All around us, the snow glows red from taillights. People are slower this morning. They edge through intersections and start braking a quarter mile away, at least. With the heater on full blast, our windows in the Jeep are bright and clear. Our breath doesn't fog in the air. But I can feel the cold from the outside pushing in. Wriggling her gloved fingers, Syd takes the wheel again when the light changes. "You went to town. You got a tattoo?" "Two," I say. The tires make a soft kissing sound. The road whisks as the wheels cut through slush. We feel solid and safe; Syd drives slower than usual, but I think that's because it's Skip's car, not because of the weather. Every so often, we'll cut a curve and the kiss turns to a groan—tires compressing new snow.

Leaning closer to the screen, I say, "Syd. Oh my god. I don't know what to say. I'm so, so sorry. I never meant to hurt you." "You didn't," she says as she pops back into view. "I did. You were oblivious. Which sucked, by the way. And I suck for saying it sucked. Jeezus, it's just stupid. It's all stupid, Ava. I don't know why everything has to be so hard. I swear, I'm not telling you this to make you feel bad. I just . . . it's . . . I feel bad, and I have to change something. All I can really change is me." Syd's anguish and resolve unfold. There's no hesitation. Something inside me breaks again. It wells over, spilling out pain because she's *practiced* saying this, and I want to ask her how long. How long has she felt like this? But that doesn't belong to me. It shouldn't. And I can't ask her to give me a chance, because I don't feel that way about her. Rasping nails and grasping fingers dig down inside, turning over all my emo-

Book Review: All the Things We Do in the Dark by Sandra Mitchell

tions, and it's just not there, I love Syd, but I'm not *in love* with her. I'm not attracted. If I could make it happen, I would. I really would. Those things, I don't say, either. My tears, I swipe away before I respond. For a brief moment, I hate the vanity of this app. That I see my own face imposed next to hers, that I'm not sitting across from Syd and holding her hands and trying to make this better. Instead, I'm trying to hide my blotchy skin and my red nose by shifting into shadow. I'm crafting my response so it sounds smarter than I am, braver than I am. More generous, more everything. Just better—better than I am, than I really am, because right now, I just hurt, and I know it's not about me, but it feels like it's about me. "Is there anything I can do? Besides leave you alone, I mean. Because I'll do that. For as long as you want me to or need me to. God, I don't know how to not be your friend, Syd."

People have been waiting for *this* girl to crack for years. It's an idle hobby, bets unconsciously laid on the odds. Vegas spread: Will Ava lose it completely? Broken, traumatized, damaged people have to. That's what they think; it's the rules. It's even coverage. Nobody gets out alive— (And here's the thing: they're not completely wrong. Finding out that one pinkie in the wrong place can send me back to the worst moment of my life—that's damage. Knowing I have to have a **masturbation** strategy in case my thoughts veer back to *that*—damage.) (keeping a dead girl in the woods so no one will touch her) (*keeping a dead girl in the woods so no one will touch her, Ava*) I admitted it before—I'm broken—but I think everybody's broken in one way or another. Mine's written on my face and underneath my skin and deep in my brain, and things aren't always okay. But you know what? Sometimes they are. Sometimes I'm fine. Maybe even most times. So all

these people peeping to see what's going to happen next in this prizefight, that's *their* brokenness. They want bread and circuses and blood. They want glasses of wine thrown in somebody's face; they want to watch somebody stare into the camera and say *they are not here to make friends*— Well, they're not getting that today. Deliberate, I straighten up and clutch my bag. "Okay, then, when you're ready to quit lying to me about what it actually is, hit me up." Something moves in me; it makes me glide. It keeps me off my knees; it lifts my head high. I walk away from my best friend, the best (mostly only) friend I've had all my life. I don't look back, because I'm angry and you know what? I

Book Review: All the Things We Do in the Dark by Sandra Mitchell

don't care what the world thinks. I don't care about the narrow gap that girls' feelings are supposed to fit in. I'm not sugar and spice and everything nice. I'm a human being—

She's going to strength training, and she thinks I'm going to do my homework and wait for her. This after she already swung back around to school to pick me up after I "talked to" Mr. Monogan. It hits me again: we're barely together and I'm lying to her. And I'm using her, because I needed a ride. I let her waste her time for me because I needed a ride. My birthday and Christmas money is running out. If Mom looks at my bank account, she's going to see a charge for Lyft, and I can't explain it. Can't ask Syd, obviously.

Can't drive myself: still no license, no idea when I'm gonna get

one. I don't want to be this person, and at the exact same time, I don't know how *not* to be this person.

Mr. Burkhardt is obsessed with pinpointing the moment the American experiment really began in history.

I'm positive that in the Ava experiment, the moment I became Ava-After, began when that man ran his finger down my face. He drew the map in my flesh, and it inexorably led

here. (*Lies, lies, lies*, my head sings.) It's the path I'm on. So I push into the warmth of the coffee shop.

The air is bitersweet, heavy with coffee and bright with cinnamon. Music jangles low in

the background, something acoustic and plinky. For a moment, time twists and it's two months into the

future. The cold behind me; the heat before me. It feels like Christmas. It feels like everything is

okay. Then 1LostMarble drops a hand on my shoulder. He drags me back to October with two words

typed into his phone. "Over here." There are already two cups on the table. Nice but also evidence that

I'm really late. As I sink into the chair across from him, I peel off my gloves, but I don't reach for the

cup. That's one of the cardinal rules, ladies. Watch your glass, never leave it untended, don't take a

drink if you didn't see the bartender/barista make it. (Has anybody ever said, "Hey, gentlemen, don't put **drugs** in people's drinks?")

DO YOU REMEMBER WHEN I TOLD YOU ABOUT THE GUY who followed me home *after*? How h

e insisted on talking to my mom? How he told her what he saw, and the next thing I remember after that

is Police-ER-Rape Kits-Superglue? I hate him. More than I hate the guy who raped me. The Good

Samaritan, I wonder about *him*. I wonder what he saw. How long he watched. Why he didn't call the

Book Review: All the Things We Do in the Dark by Sandra Mitchell

police. Why he didn't yell out the window, "Leave that girl alone!" Whether he stopped to think about whether to follow me afterward and that's why he didn't show up until I'd already been home ten, fifteen minutes (crying and yelling at myself for crying and trying to hide the crying because I didn't want my mom to notice something was wrong—

) (Because I did wrong: I talked to a stranger. *I talked to a stranger*, and a terrible thing happened, and that made it *all my fault*.) (Grade school logic. Not real logic. Just the logic of church and school and PSAs and guest speakers who happen to be police officers who are trying to help prevent One More Crime and those haters of girls previously mentioned: no matter how old or how young you are, no matter how bulletproof the story, there's always a way to blame the victim. Why did you wear that dress? Why did you go to his room? Why did you let him buy you dinner? Why didn't you say no? Why didn't you say no *better*? Why were you out that late/on that side of town **/drinking/toking/ hitch-hik-smoking/hooking up** with somebody you met online? Why did you talk to the stranger? WHY DID YOU TEMPT THE BAD MAN?) —and he showed up at the back gate and insisted. He made me get my mom. He wouldn't go away. He didn't take no for an answer, and yeah, probably he *shouldn't* have, but there were other things he shouldn't have done, either.

It forgets how to be afraid, just for a moment. When I kiss her, our lips cling together. They're not tentative or afraid—they long to hold on to the soft, silken glow between us. Her lips seek when I falter. They're plush and they invite me in. She teaches me with a taste how to follow. I've never done this before. Every flicker is terrifying and exhilarating; it's the first leap off the high dive and cutting flawlessly into the water. Twisting my hands in her shirt, my knuckles rasp against forbidden skin. Hailey unfurls against me. When she twines her arms around me, her blunt nails skate the length of my spine. They brush aside the hem of my shirt and whisper at the small of my back. It's alchemy, drinking something that makes us grow and grow, fill up the room and spill out of it, into the universe. It's so much, too much, and we break away at the same time. I burrow against her; she holds me tighter. "Hi," I say. I feel her smile on my skin.

Book Review: All the Things We Do in the Dark by Sandra Mitchell

PROFANITY APPROXIMATE COUNT (and other sensitive words)

Bitch - 2

Masturbation - 1

God – 46

RED FLAG

Rape – 2

Drinking – 2

Drunk – 3

Toking – 1

Drugs – 1

Hitchhiking - 1

CONCLUSION

Not appropriate literary content for K-12 schools