



First

Jacob
Louder

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ADVANCE PRAISE for FIRST

“FIRST would be an erotic teen Utopia, if it wasn’t for the bullies that do their best to spoil it. Louder’s novella is a literary page-turner that’s hotter than a porn mag. Get ready to redefine consent, receive blow jobs from your straight friends, and fall in love with a trans 10-year-old who deserves to wear lipstick her whole damn life. A tour de force!” —Lana Fox, author of *Confessions of a Kinky Divorcee*

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“A stunning debut by the fearless Jacob Louder, FIRST hits the erotica scene with a startlingly original voice that displays an unusual freedom in expressing sexual beginnings. The tale of teenage Nico’s introduction to the sexual side of both boys and girls has all the trappings of a good read: plausible and realistic characters; a defined and specific place and time; deliciously descriptive sex; and a bold and unapologetic voice. Not to mention that it starts with my two favorite words in the English language: “My cock....” —Dario Dalla Lasta

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Haverhill, Massachusetts
godeeperpress.com

MY COCK HAD NEVER FELT so hard or looked so big—I was *big*—and my balls were tight, like I’d fill her mouth at any second and I wouldn’t be able to pull out like I’d promised. It was weird that Hannah was sucking me, like, *really* fucking my cock with her mouth in a way I didn’t think she could, being a dyke and all, and, more importantly, my best and really only friend since we were about six. She had said, “I *want* to do it,” but it wasn’t like I asked. She just announced it, and she usually gets what she wants. We had finished watching *Twilight* for the eightieth time or something like that, and she checked her little, red phone to see if her girlfriend Kayden had sent a text, and she hadn’t. I watched Hannah put it down like it was something very fragile. There’s symbolism there, right? Point is, I could feel that she was upset.

But then Hannah turned to me with her hazel eyes and her full, rosy cheeks, her long hair freshly dyed the queerest of pinks—I had helped with that—and said she wanted to suck my cock. Hannah said, “But don’t come in my mouth, Nico,” and she even pointed at me with her thick finger with the chipped black polish on its nail and gave me her serious eyes, which meant that I had better listen up or else. I told her of course, of course I wouldn’t. I would come on the pink towel on the floor that was still wet from her hair and pinker now in splotches because of the dye. Hannah tossed the towel at my feet, at my striped red socks like candy canes. She dropped to her knees and waddled over to me, undid my studded belt, and took my cock out of my skull-print boxers, a Halloween gift from my mom.

With my cock in her hand, Hannah said, “Wow. This is you soft?” I swallowed hard because I didn’t know if she thought that was a good or bad thing. She hadn’t seen my junk in a couple years now, not since we were about twelve or so. But then she said, “When you’re hard, you’re going to be a *monster*,” and I thought, *You’re right. Wait and see.* At night, in bed, I could make myself huge, thrusting my hips up and fucking the tight grip of my hands, which I’d slicked with unscented body lotion.

Hannah smiled with her big, pink lips, which were more like the color of flower petals compared with the vibrancy of her new hair, and her tongue slipped out to lick the tip of my dick, just the slit, and I hissed like she had hurt me, like she had splashed my rod with boiling water, but it was only because I had never felt anything so good and I had always wanted to for as long as I can remember, but never in a million years did I think it would be with Hannah.

She looked at me when she put me in her mouth, and it was probably the sexiest thing I had seen ever: Hannah's eyes on mine from way down there—I'm tall for my age, my doctor says, at 5'7"—and me already growing in her hand, and for a second, it felt like we were in love, like we could be—to me, anyway. Then I remembered Mrs. McGuire, our health class teacher, telling us how boys give love for sex and girls give sex for love, so I just stopped thinking of love altogether because I didn't really want to be one of those boys.

I gasped when I felt the warmth and wetness of her mouth, the tease of her teeth up and down the length of me. She took me out to say, "Boy, you're all drama with your *oohs* and *ahhs*," and then back in I went. Between her mouth and the way she moved her hand, it wasn't long until I was hard, harder than I'd ever been, and Hannah was moaning and giggling with her mouth full of cock—my cock—and that's when I noticed her bedroom door open with a slow, hesitant push. I didn't say a word to Hannah about it. I just watched. It felt really exciting that someone would soon be witness to my cock getting sucked for the first time. I just hoped it wasn't her mom. Or Kayden.

It wasn't. It was Hannah's 10-year-old brother, Robbie. He opened the door just a crack, revealing only half of his face, just one of his big brown eyes, wide with shock, then narrowing, watching intently. His eyes were on me: first my cock hard in his sister's mouth, and then my face. I could see his pretty long hair—those wavy brown curls crashing down to his shoulders.

I've always wanted to touch it when he's on the couch playing Nintendo, just to see if it feels as soft as it looks. I liked the way he always messed with it: moving his hair away from his eyes when trying to land a trick in some skateboarding video game, or tucking it behind his ears, or finally pulling it back into a ponytail and showing off his perfect face, that olive complexion.

Through Hannah's opened bedroom door, I watched Robbie's one brown eye, the only one I could see, with its beautiful long lashes, as Hannah sucked my cock as deep as she could, like this was some competition. I could see enough of Robbie's mouth that I imagined Hannah's full lips were his—it was the only trait they shared, since they had different dads. I imagined that it was Robbie who was on his knees in front of me, not Hannah, and that I could wrap his hair around and between my fingers and pull and pull—fuck the pretty mouth of the prettiest boy in town (my only rival for that title, thank you very much). I put one hand behind Hannah's head and, with the other, grabbed one of her ears and moved my hips, pretending I was in Robbie's little mouth and he was gagging but loving it, taking all of me, wanting me deep inside him. I liked the idea of making him choke. Where he was standing behind the door, I couldn't see his hands, but I wanted one of them to be pulling on his dick and the other at his ass, working a finger into his tight, little hole, getting ready for what I wanted to give him.

First, I made sure Hannah wasn't looking, then I mouthed these words in Robbie's direction: *I wanna fuck your mouth*. After that, he disappeared.

Hannah moved her head back and forth, with her hand moving in the opposite direction of her mouth. She covered every inch of me. I made a mental note to ask her where she learned to suck cock like this, to tell her that she's taught me lots today, and maybe one day I could practice on her if Kayden would let her borrow her dildo. It occurred to me then where she learned to suck cock.

I was close to coming, to pulling out and shooting my load all over that towel. I was going to make the noises that porn guys do, go all grunts and *uh—uh, yeah*, just to see what Hannah thought of that, but her phone started playing “Let’s Go to Bed” by the Cure, and that’s Kayden, so out of Hannah’s mouth my cock went as she leaned against me to get to her feet and make her way to the phone on her nightstand. I watched the soft rolls at her waist bounce as she moved, and I remembered how much I hated her own new view of her body, the battle she was waging against it with rice cakes and water and constant trips to the scale in the ugly, olive green bathroom down the hallway, with the little blue pills she wouldn’t share with me (that’s atypical) or even tell me what they were. And all, I think, for Kayden, although she’d never say so. Kayden is Hannah’s Robert Smith: tall, dark, and with weird, fucked up lipstick and a poet’s heart. I think she’s too good to be true. Hannah thinks I’m just jealous, tells me that Robert Smith has been married to his wife for umpteenth fucking years and is still in love—and that’s where I cut Hannah off. I don’t think I’m jealous. I think I know shit when I smell it.

When Hannah grabbed her phone and answered, saying, “Hi, baby,” she turned and waved me out of her room, her face all scrunched up like I was suddenly some nuisance. I was hanging out there, hard as fuck, so I grabbed the pink towel and headed toward her bathroom. I wasn’t angry. I was happy that Kayden finally called, and that I could make myself come with my eyes closed, thinking of whomever I wanted, without being disrespectful to Hannah’s pretty masterful mouth work.

I didn’t even bother putting my cock back in my pants. It was hanging out of my fly when I passed Robbie’s bedroom on the right. He has tons of pictures of Romeo Beckham all over his walls that he made us swear we’d never, ever mention outside the house to anyone, ever, or else. Like anyone would know who Romeo Beckham was. Anyway, I remembered liking that threat, remembered how it made my dick throb, like I could feel his hot

breath on my balls when he spoke those words. Thinking of that, I couldn't help it: I looked in Robbie's room and there he was, completely naked, his small body sitting on the mess of a black comforter tangled up with red sheets, his thin legs and arms, his long, beautiful hair parted to the right, a cunning look in his eyes. Unlike me, Robbie was completely hairless, except for the downy hair on his arms and legs, stuff that I lost back when I was twelve, and last year, my body changed and I sprouted pubes. His cock was thin and pretty like the rest of him. He had a good hard-on for a little kid, too. I could see it, all red at the tip, and his balls, they were tight and perfect. If he'd let me, I'd lick and suck them all night.

Robbie saw me and my cock hanging out from my pants. He waved me into his room. "Come here, Nico."

I did, and closed the door behind me, dropping the pink towel onto the dirty, gray carpet that covered his bedroom floor. That's when Robbie got on his hands and knees on the bed, showing me his skinny ass. He used his hands to spread his cheeks, and there was his pink puckered hole, almost exactly as I had imagined it.

Robbie kept his eyes forward, on one of his pictures of Romeo, probably. He said, "Lick it."

I smiled, grabbed my cock. "Do you want me to eat your ass, Robbie?" I said this slow and sexy, like in a gay porn flick I watched, just clips of it, on the Internet.

With his hands still revealing what I wanted more than anything in that moment, he looked at me over his shoulder, a little confused. He said, "Lick it. I want to feel you lick it."

"Okay, okay," I said, like he was really putting me out or something, like he was just absolutely *forcing* me, officer, you have to believe me.

I kneeled on Robbie's mattress and moved his hands away from his ass, spreading his cheeks myself. He cleared his throat, which I thought was a little unsexy, but that sure as fuck didn't stop

me: my mouth would be on that boy even if he started reciting the Bible, even if he started singing some Justin Beiber song. When he felt my tongue around his hole, tickling him along the outside, he thrust back against my face, and that was all I needed. He smelled sweaty and of only the tiniest amount like shit. I stretched his ass cheeks wide with my thumbs and held him still by his tiny thighs. I licked and sucked that boy's hole. I worked my tongue inside—as far as I could go, at least—I didn't care what I found—and I listened to him moan and wail like he'd explode any second. And soon he was. I couldn't see it, but I could feel him working his thin, little cock, feeling the way he was jerking off, the speed and pressure—and he made a sound, a whimper, like some sad, sick thing, and that only turned me on more, so I licked him faster and more forcefully until his breathing changed.

I stopped when he suddenly grew very still. I stood up straight and noticed the tiny drops of white come on his bed sheets. I wished I had my phone on me because I would have taken a picture. It was beautiful somehow, just like him: Robbie's gentle white drops on bright red cotton.

Robbie was still whimpering. He was trying to hold it back, but he let one slip, and I burned with embarrassment or guilt as soon as I heard him, thinking I had done something really wrong, and how could Robbie ever forgive me? How could *Hannah* ever forgive me? Robbie brought his hands to his face and I knew he was crying then. I could have died right there. I couldn't think of anything to say, but I didn't want to leave. I had opened my mouth and hoped that something would come when Robbie turned to me, stretched his arms out, and threw his tiny, warm body against my much bigger one. I was reminded then of what was waiting between my legs, but I held him while he shook from working so hard to hold back what he had inside him, whatever it was. I stroked his hair and it felt soft, a little damp from too much oil. I stroked him again and again, started making the noises and saying the things my mom would say when I cried as a kid, even now

when I cry: “Shh, shh...it’s okay. It’ll all be all right.”

Robbie had his face pressed against my chest. It took him a while to get these words out because he was so worked up, but this is what he said: “Why can’t I have a pussy?”

I said, “What?” But I knew. I heard it.

Robbie said, “Why can’t I have a pussy, Nico? Why am I like this?” It was then that I could feel how wet he was making my T-shirt.

I said, “I don’t know,” because I was mostly shocked and didn’t have a good answer. This was something maybe no one had ever thought to prepare someone else for. I knew how to put on a condom and who at school to contact if we saw anyone unfamiliar in the hallways. But not this.

Robbie started to break down again, and I felt even worse, so I did the only thing I could think to do that was real and honest, and I hoped *like fuck* that it would help. I squeezed his body tight against me and I said, “You’re beautiful. Even as you are now. You are as perfect as you can be right now.”

It was like someone had thrown a switch. His body stilled as he peeled himself away from me, his big, brown eyes red and spilling with tears. He wiped his cheeks with the backs of his hands, and that began the intense sniffing. I smiled at him because I couldn’t tell what he was thinking, and I could only feel sadness in his body.

Until he looked up at me and smiled back. His smile does crazy things to my cock—it’s something to do with his lips. His hands were squeezing the flesh around his nipples, pinching his skin into strange, vertical lumps, when he said, “Do you want to come on my tits?”

My name is Yannick Peter Ericsson, but you can call me Nico. I’m fourteen years old, and this is the year I fell in love with Robbie York. She was my first.

HANNAH CAME TO GET ME with Kayden in Kayden's car, an old, black BMW with torn leather upholstery in the back seat. That's where I sat, brushing my hands through my hair as I stared at my reflection in the window on my right, since I didn't have a chance to check my reflection in a mirror before they arrived.

We were going to a party. The thing about Kayden being a senior was that Hannah and I went to lots of these because, even though we were freshman, we had an invite: Kayden. I was excited for this party because I knew Rory would be there. He is *the* most punk kid in school and is kind of a snob about it, but he has a Mohawk dyed blue, which I love, and there's a rumor that, at the last Priests show in the city, he was making out with some boy with a septum piercing and a devil's lock. When I heard this, my heart flipped, and so, for this party, I wore my best: red suspenders with jeans that were just a little too tight so that he could see my bulge (so that everyone could see my bulge, really), my old red Docs, my black Ben Sherman polo that Mom bought for me on eBay. She told me I should have worn my torn-up, baggy jeans and her old Nirvana shirt, especially since she thinks I look like a young Kurt Cobain. "Same shaggy, blond hair, at least," she said, scrambling eggs in the kitchen while I searched the apartment for our iron. "Except you're not a fuck-up. Don't you dare ever hurt yourself."

But before Rory and the party, we had to pick up Kayden's friend Angelique. She lived on the other side of town, Kayden's side of town, with all the big houses and lawns greener than I'd ever seen—green like the high school football field. When we pulled into Angelique's driveway, Kayden honked her horn. She didn't even get out and walk to this girl's front door. When I have a car, I will always do that.

Angelique must have been waiting because the door swung open almost immediately, and there she was: big black hair, short black skirt, high black boots, and a short leather coat that covered

up the rest of her, the parts I was looking forward to seeing most. From what I could see as she walked to the car—no, she *glided* to the car, with a bounce I wanted to mimic (and in those black boots, too) as soon as I saw it—she had curves I wanted to ride. When Angelique opened the car door, I sat up straight, then parted my legs wider than they had been, since that was what a lot of the older guys at these parties do, and I wanted to age a little, just in case that was what she'd want. That, and I wanted to show off my bulge.

Bent at the waist, Angelique stuck her head into the car. “Girls,” she said to the front, looking at the back of Kayden’s head and at Hannah, who had turned to wave. Then she looked at me.

She slowly moved her body into the backseat, smiling when she sat. She wore black lipstick and black eyeliner that came to a point at the sides of her brown eyes, like an Egyptian princess. The color of her skin reminded me of caramel. “Who’s this?” she asked.

I wanted to offer my hand and introduce myself properly. I would have kissed her knuckles like a gentleman, but I didn’t get the chance. As she backed her car out of Angelique’s driveway, Kayden blurted out, “That’s Nico.”

“Nico,” she said, eyes steady on me. She smelled like a witch’s spell, like something heady and herbal. “Where do you go to school?”

I brought my knees a little closer together. “Your school.”

“No kidding? I’ve never seen you around, Nico.”

“I’m a freshman.”

“Oh, oh,” Angelique said, nodding her head, giving me a sexy side glance that made my cock twitch in my tight jeans.

“Well, I like your look, Nico. I’m a sucker for thin boys with long hair and girls’ lips and a big Adam’s apple.”

I could only swallow.

Angelique stuffed her hand into a pocket of her leather coat. “Do you smoke, Nico?”

I thought about this for a second. “Smoke what?” I asked.

Angelique smiled again, releasing a soft chuckle. “I like you, son,” she said. “I like you lots.”

RORY WASN'T AT THE PARTY. This was why I followed Angelique up the stairs and into a bedroom. This was why we split a joint, and why I let her strip my clothes off. This was why I lay on the bed and felt no reservations when she ran her blood-red nails along my chest and down to my stomach, picking up my hard cock like she owned it and bringing it to her black lips.

“You have a big, beautiful cock,” she said, and then she put the tip into her mouth.

This is awesome. It was all I could think. *This is so fucking awesome,* mainly because Angelique was a junior and, as it turned out, had the most amazing tits beneath a black lace bra that, when I asked her to, she took off and dropped on the mattress. Her nipples were big, brown, and hard even before I touched them. I liked the way her dark curls, her thin, brown hands, looked on my pale skin.

Angelique slipped me out of her mouth and let a perfect, white drop of spit fall onto the head of my cock. She used her hands to spread it over me, down my shaft and back up to the tip. “Pretty boy,” she said, and I exhaled hard. “You’re not going to come yet, are you?” Angelique stopped moving her hand.

“No, no,” I said, shaking my head for emphasis, but who knew. With Angelique bent over me in her fishnets and her black, satiny panties, I could come at any second, shoot straight up onto the ceiling.

“Good,” she said. She took a long, slow lick from the base of my cock up to its head.

Me, I found myself thinking about gym class, about folding the laundry on my bed once I got back home—whatever would stop me from coming on her face.

Angelique said, “Tell me, Nico. Do pretty boys like you know how to fuck hard, like a man?”

I smiled and considered telling her that it would be my first time fucking hard like a man. I had fucked like a boy, but never with a girl. “I can fuck you as hard as you like,” I said, impressed with how convincing I was.

“That’s my boy,” she said, stepping off the bed to remove her black panties. Her big tits swung on her chest as she revealed her shaven pussy, a dark birthmark on her right hip that was the size of a quarter.

I sat up once she returned to the bed and moved in to kiss her, since it seemed like the time for kissing—both of us with our clothes off and ready to fuck. She kept her lips pursed tight, stifling a chuckle. “You don’t have to kiss me, Nico,” she said. “You also don’t have to send me flowers or nothing tomorrow.”

I said, “I want to kiss you.”

Angelique straddled me and sat on my legs. She placed one hand on my chest and moved the hair from my eyes with the other. “Do it then.”

I said, “I have beer and weed breath.”

Angelique tilted her head back and laughed out loud. I loved the way her eyes squinted, with her big, beautiful tits in front of me, so close to my face and my mouth, the softness at her belly, the way her brown skin billowed there. She opened her mouth to speak, but I covered it with my own before she could. Her lips were warm and her tongue warmer. It felt so good against mine, the way she flickered it in and out of my mouth so quickly. Then our lips pressed tightly together—I could feel Angelique’s gentle air against my face, with her exhaling through her nose—and our tongues did a much slower dance.

When I put my hands on her tits, she moaned into my mouth while I relished in the fact that—hey—I was touching a girl’s tits, a pretty girl’s tits, the tits of a pretty girl who wanted to fuck me. Nothing could have prepared me for this moment: how warm she was, how warm they were—her tits, her big, beautiful tits—how soft and smooth, and how hard her nipples were in

contrast. Our lips separated long enough for her to say, “You can pinch. Pinch and rub them, Nico,” while she gyrated in my lap, and I was convinced then that no one would believe this story.

Angelique kissed my neck while I focused on the noises she made with the different pressures of my thumb and forefinger, the slow, circular graze of my palm.

“Okay, that’s it,” she said, sitting up straight on my lap. “We need to fuck, like, right now.”

I said, “What about a condom?”

Angelique smiled. “You’re in luck, boy. I’m on the pill.”

“I’ll pull out.”

She said, “If you can *get* out, sure. I’m riding you tonight. I want to feel that big cock deep in me.”

I lay on my back with someone’s mom’s pillow beneath my head. I could smell expensive perfume from the pillowcase. I grabbed my cock and held it perfectly still as Angelique lowered her pussy onto me: so that’s what pussy lips felt like, what wetness felt like. So that’s the way a cunt can suck in a cock. Angelique took me in so easily, the wet heat of her. She felt good, really good—not too tight, but who was I to complain?

I closed my eyes, said, “Oh, fuck.”

I opened them when I felt her hands on my chest.

Angelique was smiling down at me with her black lips and princess eyes, her straight white teeth. I watched as she moved her hips up and down with her pussy on my cock, with my cock deep inside her. When she raised them up, she inhaled slowly, then rocked her hips a little to the right, circling as she came down on me, like we were mixing up the best honey ever.

That’s when I heard the door open. I froze, stopped my own hips from thrusting up into her. Angelique looked back over her shoulder, her hands still covering my nipples. She said, “Hey, baby.”

I was confused, until I saw a guy’s face, his baggy red sweatshirt, his hands stuffed in the front pocket. He had a buzz

cut, silver hoop earrings, brown eyes darker than Angelique's. I liked his jawline, his dark stubble, the smell he brought with him, reminding me of camping, reminding me of bonfires. He walked close to the side of the bed, his eyes on me. He said, "Who's this?"

Angelique said, "This is Nico. Nico, this is Brian, my boyfriend."

I looked at Brian, my cock still in his girlfriend. He watched me evenly with those dark eyes. I was scared, but there was something about him I liked, something that allowed me to give a small smile. I took in the size of his chest and shoulders. They were wide and big like a man's—he could fuck like a man—and I compared them to my own, my small rib cage, the bones exposed at my clavicle. I said, "What's up," and heard it—both of them did—the tension in my voice, that little quiver I would have sucked down if I had known it would leave my mouth.

"Relax," Angelique said, and I felt her hand on my cheek as she touched me like a child, but I kept my eyes on Brian. "He's only one of my boyfriends."

Brian tipped his chin up and returned my smile, his hands still tucked in that pocket.

Angelique grabbed my chin with enough force that I finally looked back at her. She said, "Do you want to have some fun, Nico?"

I said, "I am having fun," and I snuck another look at Brian, just in case these words changed his disposition. But it didn't. He winked at me, took his hands out of his pocket, and joined us on the bed.

With Brian pressed behind Angelique, looking over her shoulder and down at me, she started moving her hips again, up and down on me, and it somehow felt even better with Brian watching. I loved how much of my cock disappeared in her pussy. I watched this closely because I didn't want to get lost in Brian's eyes while it was Angelique who was fucking my cock.

She started to moan and pick up the pace, her body coming

down on me harder, and I knew she was right—there would be no way I could pull out in time, not with her pinning me on this mattress, not with the way her cunt was swallowing my cock. I was so deep inside her, even when she lifted her hips. Angelique was taking me in hard, short strokes, her pussy growing wetter by the moment, with her eyes closed and her lips parted just enough that I wished she was close enough for me to kiss them again.

I watched as Brian reached out, his arms beneath hers, and grabbed her tits, his big hands practically covering them completely. He squeezed them tight against her chest and started to kiss her neck. I liked the size of Brian's hands and how big he seemed, how broad and wide, with his dark stubble and his dark eyes.

Angelique's cunt started to tighten then, and her moaning grew louder as she thrust down on me, harder and harder until it felt like she would drive me through to the floor, leaving a hole in the shape of my body in the mattress. Brian disappeared as she grew closer to orgasm, fell right out of view, and I missed him as soon as he was gone. Angelique cried out and I knew she was coming, and it looked amazing—her face, like she was in the best possible pain, like my cock was splitting her insides and she loved the way it split her. It was around that time that I felt wetness on my balls, and it wasn't wetness from Angelique's pussy, but a small, hot pressure on my tight sack that I knew instantly was Brian's tongue lapping at me. So that's where he went, somehow working his head beneath Angelique to take as much of my balls into his mouth and lick at them like he was eating pussy, like he was teasing my clit, quick, gentle licks, and then, all of a sudden, I was thinking about Robbie.

With Angelique moving slowly on my cock, with her orgasm already having ripped through her body, and with my balls in Brian's hot mouth, it was soon my turn to come, and I told them. I said, "I'm gonna come, you guys. Fuck, my cock."

Angelique looked behind her at Brian, and turned back to

me, a wide smile on her face. She pinched her nipples playfully and said, “Fill me up, Nico. Go on. Fill me with your come.”

That’s when I felt it: my load exploding through the tip of my dick and deep inside Angelique. I let out a moan, one that came from deep inside and sounded more like a grunt if anything, I guess. I knew then that I could do porn. I liked my noise, my sounds in that room, what these two brought out of me, and that seemed to extend my orgasm, and I swear I would never stop coming. With my balls in Brian’s mouth, I lifted my hips up to press as far as I could inside Angelique, and, right then, I didn’t know what I liked better—her cunt or his mouth. I figured I could like them both and was happy enough with that.

Angelique leaned forward to kiss my lips once I grew still. Me, I was breathing like I had won a race. She pressed her nose against mine and said, “You are fun beyond compare, the way you squirm and moan, like some happy, little pig. I like bringing so much color to those pale cheeks.”

I said, “You and him. Fuck—you and him.” These were the only words I could string together. To me, it felt like a confession of lust and admiration. To them, it probably just sounded like I was stoned.

Brian said, “Baby, let me see.” He put his big hands on her waist, which made it look like he was lifting her off of my cock with his strong shoulders, his broad chest, still hidden behind that red sweatshirt. The length of me flopped back onto my stomach.

Brian smiled as he shoved a finger into Angelique’s pussy. She let out a squeal, but we both knew she wasn’t really mad, not with that look on face, the way she leaned back on him, content, her eyes half closed. I let out a tiny laugh, just a little uncomfortable. He moved his finger around like he was searching for something he had lost. Then he pulled it out quickly, and what followed was a sight: my white come falling from between Angelique’s swollen pussy lips, right onto my thigh. Brian brought his finger to his mouth and sucked. Angelique gave his face a

playful slap. She said, “Dirty boy!”

Brian said, “The two of you make for the most delicious meal.”

BEFORE I LEFT THAT NIGHT, Angelique, Brian, and I shared another bowl. Brian was a senior from a high school two towns over. His cock had been short and wide, like the rest of him. I took most of it down my throat while Angelique sat on his face, her hips always rocking back and forth, back and forth, like the most exquisite dancer. His spunk tasted bitter, but I swallowed it, like it had been sweet and marshmallowy.

By the time Hannah had walked into the room, my pants were back on. I searched for my socks and shirt, and found my shoes, somehow kicked far beneath the bed. Brian said, “Hey, Angie’s got your number, right?”

He was sitting in a rocking chair with Angelique in his lap, her arm draped around his neck. She said to Brian, “I’ll get it, baby,” smiling down at him and then at me. “I promise I’ll get it.”

I carried my shirt and shoes out to the car, collapsing in the back seat. Kayden turned the key in the ignition, followed by the roar of her cold engine. That’s when Hannah turned to look at me. “Every detail,” she said. “Yannick Peter. Right now!”

MY MOM AND I HAD the same last name. I didn’t have a dad and never had a dad, so why would I have needed his last name? I liked the idea that Mom could have made me herself, all by herself, even though I knew it wasn’t possible.

We shared a lot of the same traits: our narrow chins and brown eyes. I had her lips, too. I loved having her lips, especially when she put lipstick on herself, and then, if I was hanging around and I asked her to, she’d put some on me, reddening my own plump lower lip, accentuating the peaks of my upper lip, so that we were lip twins again. But that was it. I was blond and she wasn’t. She had a better nose than me: thinner, daintier. These were the

only reasons why people didn't believe that she was my mom, until they compared our chins and mouths and eyes, and then people got it.

My mom worked two jobs to keep us in our apartment and to save what she could for my college tuition. I saw her mostly in the mornings and on Wednesday, Thursday, and Sunday nights, when she made us eggs or soup with cream and carrots, or I made us pancakes or cheese and pickle sandwiches. This was when she'd ask me about school or about my friends, but we usually ended up talking about music and bands we liked. "Have you heard this song yet by this band?" I'd ask her, and she'd typically shake her head no, because I had more time to troll the Internet, looking for new bands I liked. Then I'd send her a link to their Bandcamp or SoundCloud pages, and she'd text me later, once she had the time to check them out on her phone during her commute to work on the bus, saying something like, "This is good, Nico," or "You're my son. I've raised you to have better taste than this!" Then we had something to talk about the next time we had dinner together.

I'd never seen my mom in a relationship, not once in my fourteen years. She was gay. She might have been fucking tons of women for all I knew, but never in the apartment, and I'd never met any of the women if she had been fucking women, which means, as far as I was concerned, they weren't worth much.

In one of the two photo albums we had in our old, maple bookcase filled with her books about dead modern artists, there were pictures of her and Liz. I was pretty sure Liz was the love of her life. There was a picture in the photo album of Mom and Liz in a pub in London when both of them were much younger. Beneath it, Mom had written, "Our big night." She never told me what that meant, what was so big about it, and I stopped asking, because she got really still and grumpy each and every time I asked her. In this picture, my mom had brown hair running long past her shoulders and rosy pink cheeks, probably from the beer they'd been drinking, with two empty pint glasses on the table, and two others that were

only half full. Liz had short-cropped black hair and big, brown eyes. She was wearing a black leather jacket, her arm draped over my mom's shoulders, which were bare, courtesy of her summer dress. I liked Liz even more because she was wearing leather in the summertime. In the picture, they were both smiling at the camera like they'd never be that happy again.

In these photo albums, there was picture after picture of Mom and Liz, and then you turned one page, and there was me and Mom—me just a couple hours old, all pink and scrunched up like some ugly Shar Pei puppy. Me and Mom on my first birthday. Me and Mom eating blue popsicles. Me and Mom building an icy snowman that only came up to her knees. Once you got to the me-and-Mom part of these albums, there were no more pictures of her with Liz.

Liz visited us every year, though, usually in the summer—sometimes in June for Mom's birthday. This year, she came for Thanksgiving, flew all the way from Los Angeles to eat a tofu turkey with us in shitty, snowy Massachusetts. I answered the door when she buzzed because I always do. For as long as I can remember, I've opened the door to let Liz in. She used to stoop down to take me into her arms, but she hasn't done that for years. This year, when I opened the door, I watched her mouth open just a little, her brown eyes sparkling even in the dim hallway light. She said, "Nico—Jesus, you are gorgeous," in this really dreamy way that made me realize for the millionth time why my mom was so crazy about Liz. When she opened her arms and brought me against her chest, I could feel her warmth beneath her cold leather jacket. She smelled like something I should be wearing: strong and musky, a scent I would wear to show everyone how much of a man I was.

For my mom, Liz brought a really expensive bottle of red wine that was opened even before Liz had her jacket off. Mom poured it into big goblet glasses and handed one to Liz, who was still red-cheeked from the weather and her walk from the bus

station. For me, she brought her old Morrissey LPs, which nearly made me cry with happiness, I love that guy so much. Licking his hand on the cover of *Your Arsenal*, holding his mic low like it's his cock—God. I would seriously let that guy fuck any one of my holes, as long as he sang while he did it. Liz gave me a half hug and told me to breathe, *breathe*, with my hands shaking as I held out each album before me: *Viva Hate*, *Southpaw Grammar*, *Bona Drag*. Liz said, “He’s too old for you now, Nico, and you’re too pretty for him. You’ve got better things coming.” This was the only time in my life that I questioned Liz’s guidance on anything.

We talked about music while Mom baked the asparagus and waited for the potatoes to boil. She let me scroll through her iTunes library on her iPhone, standing close behind me, watching over my shoulder. I loved the way she smelled and wondered if Mom would comment on it, if she’d love it, too—another thing we’d share.

When we were done with music, we talked about her clothes, which I always liked and wanted to wear myself, but this year, she said I would be too tall for everything: her gray, wool pants, her crisp, white shirt and skinny black tie beneath a black sweater with elbow patches. Then we talked about her hair, which was cut like Rupert Graves’ in *A Room With a View*. She told me that I could get it cut like hers, that my hair would fit the style perfectly. And isn’t that guy handsome, she asked, that guy from *A Room With a View*, and did I know that he was now in the cast of *Sherlock*?

“Rupert Graves,” I said.

“Is that his name?” Liz raised her squinting eyes, looking just over my head, like she was trying hard to look way back into movie-actor memories long lost.

“Yeah. It’s Rupert Graves, and he *is* handsome, but not as much as Steven Patrick,” I said.

Liz smiled at me as she brought her wine glass to her lips.

The rest of the day, my mom talked to Liz, and Liz talked to my mom. There were no weird silences like there usually were

every year, even though they would only last for a half hour or so. I assumed they had been talking on the phone or emailing a lot, so they just picked up where they had left off the last time they communicated. When I mashed the potatoes, they stepped out of the kitchen into the living room where my Morrissey records waited for me on the couch. I hoped that my mom was kissing Liz on the mouth and that Liz was holding my mom tight against her warm body, and that my mom would press her nose against Liz's neck and take in her scent while she ran her hands through Liz's seriously awesome hair. If there's anyone I'd want to be my dad, it's Liz.

They finished the bottle of wine before they finished eating, their cheeks rosy for reasons other than the cold outside. When there was little left of the tofu turkey, and when all of the asparagus was gone, my mom got up from the table and went for her coat. She told me not to clear the table, to leave everything as it was and that she would clean up later. I was wolfing down mashed potatoes when I noticed how happy she looked, a softness in her face and eyes while she worked her arms into the sleeves of her coat. It could have been the wine she drank, but it didn't feel like it was. I looked at Liz, relaxed in her seat and watching my mom evenly—desirously, I swear it. Liz caught me looking at her, and I dropped my eyes to my plate and ate some more. Mom said, “There's a store on the corner that's opened today. Do you want to go for a short walk?”

She wasn't talking to me. Liz pushed back in her chair and got to her feet. “Let's go,” she said.

I cleaned up anyway, put all the leftovers into the fridge and even did the dishes. The idea of Mom with Liz seriously motivated me. I wiped down the counters and the top of the stove, the little spots of mushroom gravy that had splattered in the microwave. I threw out the trash. Then I took my Morrissey records into my bedroom and closed the door, sent Hannah a text to see if she was doing anything later. She didn't respond, so I figured she and

Robbie and their mom were eating Thanksgiving dinner late. I put on my headphones and listened to Morrissey croon from my phone while I stared at his beautiful face. I lay on my back on my bed, rubbing my cock through my jeans, looking at his beautiful mouth, which made me think of Robbie's beautiful mouth, which made me wonder how he was doing with his new girl underpants.

I had stolen Robbie a set of four from Macy's the last time I was at the mall with Hannah and Kayden. Robbie came along, too, and we ended up bailing on the girls because I am sick to death of Hot Topic. Plus, Robbie was wearing tight jeans and a pale blue tank top beneath his heavy coat. They both looked good on him, just like the light pink lipstick he put on as soon as we were out of Kayden's car. He did it using the floor mirror at the Gap, pulling a wrinkled tissue out of his front pocket to fold in half and press against his lips.

When we walked past Victoria's Secret, all of a sudden Robbie was talking about his underpants: how much he hated wearing them and how ugly they were, with the thin blue and yellow stripe on the waistband—the Fruit of the Looms his mom would buy him cheap at Walmart—and how he wished his body was just a little bit bigger so that he could wear Hannah's. “Why don't they at least make *nicer* underpants for boys?” he asked, his eyes lazy on the bras and negligees as we passed the display window.

“I wear boxer briefs.” It was the only thing I could think to say in response.

Robbie brushed his long hair from his eyes. “Let me see,” he said.

I pressed my back against the glass of the window and pulled out the waist of my red plaid pants. We both looked down, indifferent to the people walking past who were shaking their heads, some looking horrified. What I saw was my black underwear and the outline of my kind of interested cock. Whatever Robbie saw made him smile.

“They look good on you, but wouldn’t on me,” he said.

Of course they wouldn’t, and before I knew it, I was in the girls’ underwear department on the second floor at Macy’s. I left Robbie outside the store with his fingers stretched and pressed against his beautiful pink lips, stifling giggles, even though everyone could see his torso moving, his hunched shoulders. All the old men on the benches leaning forward on their canes knew we were up to something. “Be careful, Nico!” was the last thing I heard him say, and I kept moving forward: me, the White Knight, and Robbie, the damsel to be.

Turned out, I got him exactly what he wanted: panties with lace on the leg and waistband, and colors like lavender and pink, a few with tiny flowers on white and yellow. He put on a pair in a stall of a quiet men’s room near the food court while I waited by the sinks, and I heard him suck in air in an amazed sort of way. I snuck a peek through the crack that ran along the side of the stall door. “Well?” I asked.

From what I could see, he looked good in pink and white polka dots. The underwear fit him snugly, and I watched him rub his crotch over the cotton, trying to figure out how to properly adjust to the different fit. He said, “They’re awesome. They feel amazing.”

“You look good,” I said. And I meant it.

“Can you see?” He looked at the door of the stall, but couldn’t figure out from where I was peeping.

“Fuck yeah,” I said. I didn’t tell Robbie, but right then, with his hand moving over his cock beneath his girls’ underpants, and then back across his tiny ass, I got hard as I pressed myself against that door, taking all of him in. I wondered how he’d feel about showing them to me later, letting me do my own exploration of his new pretty things.

To be honest, Moz was beautiful, but he had nothing on Robbie. On my bed, my cock was out of my jeans, hard in my hand, and in my head, Robbie was rubbing the tip of my dick

against his little cock, tucked beneath his new cotton panties. I blew my load all over those tiny yellow daisies, but when I opened my eyes, short of breath and my chest quickly moving up and down, I saw that I had sheets to change.

I FELL ASLEEP. TOO MANY potatoes, too big and too messy of an orgasm, and I don't know why I found it surprising that I lost nearly four hours to my day. I had missed loads of texts from Hannah, who wanted to know if I was going to a party tonight in some town on the Cape, and I don't know if she thought that I had a ride or something, or made previous plans, maybe with Angelique and Brian, but I typically don't go to any parties without Hannah, since Kayden is always our ride. Then she sent a text asking about whether or not I stole those panties for Robbie. In a separate text, she wrote that, if I did, we needed to talk.

I sent one back, asking if she was still going to the party and, if so, I'd ask my mom if I could go out tonight.

Hannah, being Hannah, replied, "See you at 7:00," which, according to my clock, was only 30 minutes away.

I dropped my phone on my bed and checked my hair in the mirror. It was a mess and, if I couldn't tame it with my brush, would likely require a hat. Next up was asking mom, so I headed out to the living room, which was dark like the kitchen and the hallway. Mom and Liz were still out, I thought at first, but that would have meant that they've been out for hours now, and Mom definitely would have sent me a text about this, since she's good about that and always does for me what she asks me to do for her: let her know when plans have changed.

There was only one more place left to check, so I headed toward her bedroom, and as I got closer, I noticed the light in the gap between her door and the jamb. She had left it a little bit open, which was usual, but the light could have been on before she and Liz left for the liquor store, so I went to check.

I should have stopped. I should have stopped when I heard

what I heard, but what I heard was not my mom's usual noises, and if it was my mom, I needed to see if she was okay.

She was okay. She was more than okay, on her back, her black skirt bunched high around her thighs, her legs open with Liz between them, who was holding herself up on her hands and knees. I saw the muscles in Liz's back move before I noticed the motion of her hips. There was no other word than "thrusting." Liz was thrusting against my mom in these little black boy briefs, and it took me a while to see it, but I did eventually—the flesh-colored cock moving in and out of my mom. My mom was loving it, her eyes closed, her top off, no bra. She was squeezing her own tits in her hands, and I watched her for a bit, interested in the color of her nipples, in how hard they were. Her nipples were big and rosy. They were beautiful, and the shape of her breasts was like what I'd seen in Internet porn, on the really hot chicks at the free sites. My mom had great tits, and then I felt my cock jump, so I pressed against it through my jeans, sort of willing myself to maintain flaccidity.

Liz lowered her mouth onto one of Mom's tits, and then she really let out a moan, my mom, wrapping her arms around Liz's neck while she sucked her nipple, and Liz's thrusting got faster, and I noticed how big Liz's cock was—not long, but thick—thick as fuck, it looked so good—and I got really proud of my mom for taking so much. Liz was seriously fucking her then, her mouth moving from Mom's tits to Mom's mouth. I could see the muscles in Liz's back, the way her shoulder blades raised and spread. Liz kissed her as Mom moaned and moaned and ran her hands through Liz's fucking awesome hair, and I wondered if it felt soft and light between her fingers, because that's the way it looked to me.

My cock was hard. I felt weird about this, with prickles of hot shame running over my face and chest. Like, for a while, constant waves of shame. But I didn't move. I wanted to see what would happen. I wanted to see Liz's cock make my mom come. I wanted to see Liz's cock mostly, while she was lying on her back,

her hand giving it a gentle tug, her cock thick in her hand, thick in my mouth. I wondered if she could maybe fit it into my ass, if I could take it as well as my mom, if that was another trait we both shared.

And soon my mom was moving in time with Liz, and it looked so fucking beautiful, the two of them connected in this way, cock in cunt. Mom was wailing all of a sudden, having torn her mouth from Liz's deep kiss, vocalizing what sounded like the most amazing orgasm ever, like she was falling and falling and didn't care where she landed. Liz was thrusting, was fucking, with her nose against Mom's cheek. She was whispering to Mom. I don't know what she was whispering—I couldn't hear—but in my head, Liz was saying, "I'm going to come. I'm going to come so fucking deep in your pussy and you're going to love it," and then I thought about how fucking cool dykes are.

They settled soon after. Mom pulled Liz against her tits, and Liz kissed my mom's cheek and neck, slow kisses that I imagined were wet and hot. I waited for a second, to see if Liz would get up and show me that huge cock of hers, but they started talking in normal voices and I bolted out of there in case one of them looked my way.

I had twenty-five minutes before Hannah and Kayden would be in Kayden's car waiting outside my apartment. In my bedroom, I closed my door, unbuttoned my jeans and pulled them down over my hips, my cock jumping out, ready for this. I grabbed the towel that hung from my closet door, jerking my dick just a little, loving how hard I felt, how long and big I was. I spread out the towel on my bed, licked the palm of my hand, making sure it was good and wet, and gave my cock a firm grab, like it had done something wrong and it was in serious trouble now. I closed my eyes, waving my cock up and down—in my head, against Robbie's imaginary pussy, his pussy to be, slapping the hairless lips, how pink they were, how tight he looked. My hand was Robbie's cunt and I fucked him furiously, and he was telling me how big I was,

how much I was stretching his cunt, and to not stop. *Don't stop, Nico. Fuck me with that big fucking cock.*

In record time, I blew a huge load all over the towel, all over Robbie's beautiful pink pussy. He used a finger to bring my come to his mouth, sucking it off, licking it clean. The best part was when he said *thank you* before he kissed me on the lips, with his hands in my hair, eyes closed, his long brown lashes over his olive skin. Beautiful Robbie.

I DON'T KNOW WHAT HAPPENED to Hannah. When I walked out to the parking lot, she jumped out of Kayden's car and I thought, *Oh, she has to pee.* But she walked at me with such determination and with this look on her face. She had dyed her hair black. It bounced on her shoulders from the fierceness in her step, like violent waves. I couldn't tell what was going on, but I guessed that maybe she had just had a fight with Kayden in the car, with her hands balled into fists at her sides and her eyes focused in this way that I'd only seen a few times, and never directed at me. I stopped walking because I was confused, but that made her pick up the pace, and I had only a short amount of time to take her in, how much weight she had lost. I could see it in her face and definitely in her hips, in her thighs. And it occurred to me then, as she got closer and closer to me, that we hadn't shared a large fries or a peanut butter with hot fudge sundae at the mall in a really long time, and we used to do that a lot—every time we were at the mall together. But now when we go to the mall, she's always with Kayden and I'm always with Robbie, and as I was thinking this, and as Hannah got so close to me that I could see that she was really angry with Kayden, I said out loud, "Jesus Christ—you have gotten *really* thin," and thin wasn't really the word for Hannah, but I wanted to use it to emphasize how much her body had changed. I wanted to use a word I know she'd want to hear.

Instead of speaking, though, instead of replying to this, she smacked the side of my head. For a few seconds, all I could hear

was my ears ringing.

She wanted to know if I knew what I had done. She wanted to know if I knew what had happened to Rob because of me.

I held the left side of my face with both hands. All I could think was, *Who's Rob?* But instead I said, "Ow! What the fuck!"

Hannah was in my face. I could feel her anger—the energy coming from her body and surrounding mine, keeping me still. She told me that, because of me, Rob had gotten beaten up at school on Tuesday. Not only had he gotten beaten up, but the kids had ripped off his jeans to expose girls' underpants—yellow with pink stripes. My heart sunk because I knew exactly who Rob was then, and I didn't want to hear the rest of the story. But Hannah told me. Everyone laughed at him, and some of them spit and others kicked while he was down on his knees at the city playground he passed every day on his walk to and from school. Seven of them, Hannah said. Maybe more—who knows. His face, Hannah said, looked like it was hit by an army. The fight—*if you could call it a fight*, she emphasized, her cheeks pink from cold or anger or both—was broken up by an Iranian cab driver, and how she or Robbie had known he was Iranian was anyone's guess. But was it true, Hannah wanted to know, that I was the one who had given him the underpants?

I was in pain in all these strange, unfamiliar ways, and I felt trapped and a little betrayed. I don't know how I looked, what was on my face. I didn't feel angry. I felt scared. Still, I said, "Yeah, I got them—he wanted them!"

Hannah pressed her forearms against my chest and pushed. "You're a dick, Nico!"

She was pointing at me, and I had my hands in the air, like I felt free from blame, but the weight from Hannah's push was still lingering over my heart, and I wondered if I would bruise. I wanted to know if Robbie was okay and if there was anything I could do to get Hannah to stop screaming. I didn't want my mom and Liz to hear us or to know what I did.

“He’s weird enough,” she said, still pointing at me, like I was someone she didn’t know, like I was some freak who had messed with her family and messed with it bad, “and everyone at school knows it. He doesn’t need you and your dumb ideas fucking him up any more. Leave my brother alone!” Then Hannah turned and I watched as she walked then ran back to Kayden’s car. When she slammed the door behind her, Kayden pulled away, leaving me there.

I DIDN’T WANT TO GO back inside because I didn’t want Mom or Liz to see me crying. It wasn’t like it would be the first time, but my head felt heavy and my chest hurt, so I just wanted to be alone. I walked toward the bus station where the comic book store and record shops were, even though I knew they’d be closed on Thanksgiving. I wondered if the movie theater would be open. I would watch anything, whatever was playing closest to the time I arrived.

My hands were cold two blocks in, but I stuffed them into my pockets and pressed my fingers against my thighs to try and keep them warm. I thought about Robbie and if he was pissed at me. How could I see Robbie if Hannah wasn’t talking to me? How would I even *know* if he was pissed at me, or if he was okay, his face—his thin arms and legs, how much damage could they take? How would I find out who those kids were, so that I could make a little visit after school and let them know exactly why my hands were wrapped around their necks, exactly why it was hard to breathe and—look, you’re pissing yourself now, coward. I would say that. *Look at you pissing yourself in front of all your friends, Big Man.* I didn’t care how little the kid was. And I’d want Robbie to be there. I would want him to stand proud, back straight, that little, smart-ass grin on his beautiful lips.

But then I heard my name, and it took a while before I realized that it was *me* that someone wanted. I stopped and looked around, couldn’t find a face that was looking back, and then I felt

a hand on my shoulder. I turned to see Rory: beautiful, crush-worthy Rory, with his big, lazy smile and his blue Mohawk flat on his head, drained of its anarchy. His brown eyes were glassy and a little bloodshot, and his lips were wet, like he was hungry or eager or just really, really excited.

We were standing outside Porter's Liquor Store. Rory said, "No Thanksgiving celebration with the fam tonight?"

I watched him for a second too long. He moved his eyes from mine. "No," I said. "We did it in the afternoon."

"Cool," Rory said, wiping his nose with the back of his hand. He was rocking from foot to foot. I couldn't tell if he was just cold or really high. "What you doing now?" he asked.

"I was going to the movies."

"All by yourself?" He really looked surprised by this, like it was the most dangerous, most rebellious thing he had heard of anyone doing ever.

"Yeah, by myself." It was my turn to look down. I liked his eyes on me, but I felt so heavy and a little sick. It was the worst possible time to see Rory. "I was going to sneak in through the back." Which was a lie, but, heavy chest or not, I still wanted serious cred with this guy.

"Don't risk it, dude," he said and actually touched my arm then, just a little squeeze high near my shoulder. It felt kind of electric. "Come with me and John to watch some vids at his place."

It was just me and Rory on the sidewalk, an older lady holding her handbag low by her legs that was walking far, far away from us. I asked, "Who's John?"

Rory used his thumb to point to the store behind us.

"Getting beer. Want something else? He's totally cool."

"Nah," I said. "Where does John live?"

"Not far from here. That's his car." It was some shiny, black Mercedes, which reminded me of Hannah's new hair color. It looked out of place in this neighborhood, parked perfectly parallel to the sidewalk, like it was daring anyone who passed to touch it,

to take a part away.

“Could I walk back home, from his house?”

“You live in the complex near Green Street?”

I nodded. I had no idea Rory knew anything about me.

“No problem,” he said and smiled wide again, his eyes squinting into little slits. “Come with us, Nico.”

Like I’d say no to that. I sent Mom a text, letting her know I’d be home late.

JOHN WAS COOL, BUT IN a Dad sort of way. He was really excited to meet me, talked about not having met any of Rory’s friends before, but how cool it was that he was meeting one now. (Rory turned to me from the front seat and rolled his eyes.) John had neatly cropped gray hair and long sideburns. His hairstyle made him look a little younger than he was, and his clothes did, too. He dressed like a college kid, with Vans slip-ons and black jeans and a black pea coat. He even had a little maroon messenger bag where he kept his keys and wallet, his Ray Bans. It wasn’t until we were back at his place that I saw his Smiths T-shirt, and when I did, I relaxed enough to take off my coat and hold it in my arms against my chest.

Rory was putting the beer in the fridge, and I was standing in the living room of John’s big, three-floor condo, with the fireplace that ignited with the push of a button and the two leather sofas and the wood beams in the high ceilings. Everything looked so nice and clean: the tops of the black boxy coffee tables, shiny from lacquer, shiny like John’s car; the white carpets over the gleaming hardwood floors; the bright white walls with the framed black and white photographs of beautiful young men.

I didn’t know where to sit. John was staring at me, his sharp, blue eyes unwavering. He had thick, gray eyebrows that reminded me of a puppet’s, a sly, little smile that I couldn’t figure out if I should trust or not. He was standing opposite me, with only the coffee tables between us. Finally, he pointed. “Have a seat,

Nico,” John said. “Enjoy.”

I stood still, turning to watch Rory return from the kitchen with two bottles of beer. He handed one to me and looked at John. “I thought you said you bought, like, snacks or something.”

“I did!” John said, his voice high and languid, a little queeny. “They’re in the usual place. You know that.”

“I didn’t see nothin’,” Rory said, heading back to the kitchen. I noticed his white socks, dirty at their soles, as he walked away.

John looked at me again. “All he does is eat. I have no idea how he stays so amazingly thin and gorgeous.” He fell back onto one of the leather sofas. I heard the cushions creak. *The squeal of the ghosts of dead animals*, my mom calls that noise. “Are you going to sit, Nico?”

I smiled and sat, my feet tapping on the white rug beneath me.

“Don’t be nervous,” John said, crossing his legs. “We only have good times here.”

I tipped my beer bottle toward John. “Where’d you get that Smiths shirt? It looks old.”

“That’s ‘cuz *he’s* old,” Rory said, and he was back, just like that, and I couldn’t have been happier to not be alone with John anymore, even if it was for only seconds at a time. Rory held a bag of Chee-toes in one hand and Doritos in the other, with a package of Girl Scout cookies under his arm, the chocolate mint kind I liked best. I loved to look at Rory: the way he wore his jeans so low, with his studded, black belt, his wallet chain, and his baby blue boxers tight against his ass. He had on a purple T-shirt two sizes too small with an anarchy symbol drawn on the front with black marker, loads of button pins near the collar. I could see the scabs on his elbows, probably from taking a spill or two on his skateboard. Rory always looked so good in a really punk rock, fucked-up way. In John’s neat place, he looked even more like a dirty ball of chaos.

And he had a flippant mouth to match. I looked at John to catch his reaction to Rory's dig. It was like he had never taken his eyes off me. But then he looked at Rory, tsiked, and faked pouty lips. "You speak such cruel words, my beautiful, blue-haired boy."

Rory collapsed next to me on the sofa and laughed, his mouth open, head back. Everything and everyone felt so exaggerated, like a terrible high school play. I didn't know if it was them or me, still feeling fucked over by Hannah and worried about Robbie.

"John," Rory said, "is, like, *completely* obsessed with me."

IT WAS MY FIRST TIME drinking Sierra Nevada. It was called Torpedo, which I thought was kind of funny. Rory said that they get him wasted quicker, and I'd agree with that, since the movie *Brazil* seemed much stranger than usual, and *My Own Private Idaho*, despite the ridiculous beauty of both River Phoenix and Keanu Reeves, bored the shit out of me. I was up off the sofa and looking around John's big place, at all the pictures on his walls. I drank three Torpedoes and suddenly felt really brave and a little like I was floating. I'd walk near one of the photos and John would say, "That's Derek" or "His name is Marco." One time when I had turned back toward John to acknowledge that I had heard him or to ask some follow-up question I was sure to forget the answer to, I noticed that he had moved into my spot on the sofa next to Rory, his bigger body leaning in toward Rory's slighter frame, an arm loose around Rory's neck as Rory stuffed his face with fake cheese products. With his legs slightly spread, I could see that John's cock was hard beneath his black jeans.

I turned away to look closer at the kid in the photograph. He had a shaved head, pretty brown eyes and full pink lips just slightly apart, like he was about to say something and then—*snap*—there he was, printed and then framed on John's wall. He reminded me of Angelique's Brian. It was just a headshot, but I imagined this boy was naked on John's bed, wherever that was in

this house. I wondered if we'd see it soon, me and Rory. I bet Rory knew where John kept the bed sheets. I bet Rory knew where John kept everything: money, candy, condoms.

I had to pee. "You guys," I said, turning my back to the picture of the boy with beautiful lips I wanted to kiss. "Where's the bathroom?"

John pointed toward the hallway on my left. "Second door on your right."

It smelled like parsley inside John's tiny bathroom with its black tiles and red walls. I liked how it looked like it was a bathroom you'd find in hell, but smelled like one you'd find in the apartment of an older gay man who probably shopped at Target. When I unzipped my jeans, I heard a doorbell ring, and then Rory's voice. He said, "It's the girls!"

My heart did a weird flip. I guessed these girls were coming over to John's house to see Rory, not John. I was pissing and thinking, "John lets this happen?" But then I figured I probably didn't know much about John and Rory or what their situation was, and whatever it was, it was cool with me as long as nothing got strange, and strange would mean John suddenly being mean and rude to all of us with the girls there, whoever those girls were.

It turned out I only recognized one of them. Her name was Michelle and she was a junior at our school, like Rory. She had long black hair and a spiral perm. Her lip was pierced and I heard her tongue was, too, mostly from guys whose cocks she'd supposedly sucked. She was smiling at Rory, already holding a bottle of beer, the other hand on her hip. She had always been kind of mean to Hannah, so I didn't know her well and didn't really want to. I knew her last name was McMahan. She was really tall—about my height—and had amazing legs beneath a short, plaid skirt and matching red creeper boots. The thing about Michelle, from what I knew, was that her parents had enough money for her to dress really fucking cool like this, with her bright red lipstick and heavy black eyeliner, and so, since she could dress this cool,

everyone who couldn't was a poser or a fake, and therefore not cool enough to be her friend. I think this was how she and Hannah fell out.

When Rory saw me coming back into the room, he introduced me to Michelle and Sadie, who was the girl with shoulder-length, orangey hair I didn't know, but if I had to judge from the way she dressed and the small, shy smile on her face, I figured we'd get along just fine. She wore an oversized, navy blue zip-up hoodie with patches sewn on the arms: a Julie Ruin one and a Perfect Pussy one that I thought was cool. I assumed Perfect Pussy was a band, and not some conceited proclamation. Her jeans were loose and shredded at both knees, cuffed at the ankles to reveal dirty gray Converse sneakers. When I said "Hi," I looked only at Sadie, mostly out of allegiance to Hannah. She had really pretty green eyes.

John was no longer in the room. I asked Rory where he had gone.

"To the bathroom upstairs since you were using the one down here," he said.

Michelle walked with long, sexy strides toward the sofa, holding her beer bottle between delicate fingers clad in big, silver jewelry, like some medieval maiden. She moved like something sleek and threatening, the way she took up space so confidently. She was like a big cat loose from the zoo.

"John always disappears for a little bit when we show up," Michelle said. "We figure he's beating off, per usual."

Rory laughed loudly and scratched at his stomach, his hand beneath his too-small shirt. "He's definitely beating off. Did you see his rager, Nico?"

I had my hands in my front pockets. I nodded.

"Do you think it was for you, Rory, or for him?" Michelle asked, her long body lowering onto the black leather sofa. She kept her eyes on me.

"Who knows. Who cares," Rory said, taking up the spot

next to her. The pauper next to the princess—it was weird to see. How was it possible Rory and Michelle even got along, with her supposedly so snobby and him so—*not*—with his nails stained orange from his cheesy snacks and his dirty white socks?

Then it all came together. Rory said, “Nico, have a seat, dude.”

I returned to the sofa now opposite Rory with Michelle, with John still off doing whatever with his cock, peeing or wanking. Sadie joined me, but she sat a good distance away. Still, I could smell the cigarette smoke in her sweatshirt.

Rory pulled one of John’s tiny, black coffee tables close to his knees. He grabbed a baggie from his front pocket and then a small glass pipe, laying them both down while Michelle produced a lighter. I don’t know what I did in response—make a noise I wasn’t aware of, straighten my back like some prude, or maybe it was something I did with my face—but I felt Sadie’s hand touch my arm before she said, “It’s okay. I’ve never had a bad experience with these two.”

I looked at Sadie and said quietly, “There’s no fucking way I’m smoking crack.”

Sadie giggled, but not in a cruel way. There was too much softness in her eyes, and I noticed then the light makeup on her face, how pretty she was: her pale skin, her tiny nose pierced with a small, silver ring, her thin, pink lips. “It’s not crack, Nico,” she said. “It’s crystal.”

“What’s crystal?” I asked her.

“It’s good,” Michelle answered, suddenly smoking a clove cigarette. “John gets good stuff at the fag bars.”

“It’ll make you horny,” Rory said, flashing me a predatory grin that managed to make my cock jump, even through all my jitters.

“If you want, just smoke a little, especially if you’ve never done it before,” Sadie said, slipping her big sweatshirt from her shoulders. “That’ll probably be all you need.” Beneath it, she

wore a tiny, yellow tank top made of tight, thin cotton—so thin, in fact, that I could see her red bra. Her tits were way bigger than I'd imagined, considering her small frame. She looked amazing in that tank top. I wanted her to move closer to me. I wanted her to show me how to smoke from that pipe, to put it to my lips and say, "Go on—just a little."

It almost went exactly like this. When Sadie got the pipe and lighter from Michelle, she took a slow, long hit and then passed them to me. I got to touch her hands in this exaggerated way that made her smile. "Don't be afraid," she said, her eyes sparkling.

"Can you help me?" I was holding the pipe and lighter like I didn't know what went where.

"This is going to be cute," Michelle said. "I can tell."

Rory had his head in Michelle's lap, watching us, his mouth slightly open. She was running her fingers with their heavy silver jewelry through his blue hair, tucking some behind his ear. "Just hurry a little," he said. "I'm ready for another."

Sadie slid from her side of the sofa to mine, and, for a second, I let myself look straight down the front of her tank top to see how her big, pale tits sat so snugly in that red bra. She said, "Put the pipe in your mouth and when I say 'inhale,' do that."

I was ready to go. Sadie flicked the lighter and held the flame beneath the glass bowl of the pipe. She said, "Go, Nico. Inhale," and I did. I took way too much and ended up coughing.

Sadie came closer and put her hand on my knee. She said, "Just one more time, except a tiny breath now."

I did exactly what she said, and it didn't take long. My heart settled back into its normal rhythm. For a while, it felt like the room was exploding.

I WAS HAPPY TO SEE that John was back. He had Rory in his lap on the red seat in the corner. It took me a while to realize that they were both naked, and that Rory's cock was hard and John's was,

too, moving in and out of Rory's ass. Rory had one leg up over the arm of the chair, and John was moving him up and down, like he was the lightest boy in the world. John had his head back and his eyes closed, whimpering like he was in pain. John's noises, they made me touch my dick inside my jeans and start a slow rub. My hand on my cock felt better than it ever had before.

Michelle was standing next to them both, but she was kissing Rory—really deep, sexy kisses. I could see their tongues slipping from each other's mouths. She had her hand on Rory's cock and was working it in this really magical way. It may have been the crystal, but it looked like she was some gothic conductor, moving Rory's cock forward and then backward and then a little to the right with each downward stroke of her hand. Rory's cock was pale, but red at the tip, and shiny all over. They were using lube.

Michelle was still fully dressed, but since the other guys were naked, I decided to unzip and take out my dick. I was already hard, but knew I had room to grow. It occurred to me then that I didn't know where Sadie had gone. I called out to her. I said, "Sadie! Where did you go?" and I must have been really loud, because she was suddenly in my face with her green eyes and orangey hair, saying, "Shh, Nico. I'm only right here."

I said, "Do you mind? That I took out my cock? I really want to come, watching John and Rory fucking. I like those noises he's making—John, I mean."

Sadie smiled and looked down in my lap. She lifted her eyes to me. "Do you mind if I take out my tits?"

"I don't mind if you take out anything. You should take it all out. If you don't mind."

Sadie sat back down on the couch with me, her legs crossed over mine. She leaned forward and took off her tank top, and then off came her bra, and I watched her tits bounce, her pink nipples already hard. She looked down and pinched them, and then gently ran her fingers over her breasts, teasing her pale, white skin with her short nails. She wasn't touching me like that, but it felt like she

was, my hand suddenly becoming hers. I wanted my hand to be hers. I said, “Oh, fuck. You have amazing fucking tits. I love your tits.”

Sadie said, “Do you want to fuck them, Nico?”

I stopped pulling on my cock. “Are you serious?”

She lay flat on her back, her tits spreading wide. “Come,” she said and pulled on the leg of my jeans.

To be honest, I would have preferred a blowjob, but I’m happy I got anything, since she took one look at my cock and said, “There’s no way that’s fitting inside me.” Michelle came over with the bottle of lube. Sadie took it from her and squeezed some out into her palm. She rubbed it over her tits and then, looking up at me, said, “May I?” I nodded, and she took my cock. I could feel the velvety slick of her hand, and I closed my eyes and breathed deep because I didn’t want to come yet.

When I opened my eyes, John and Rory had changed positions. Rory was sitting in the chair and John was sucking his cock, his head moving up and down, with Rory’s hands in John’s short, gray hair. The way Rory had this dumb look on his face, I figured John gave really good head. I wondered if John only sucked Rory’s cock, or if he sucked and licked other things, too. Would he like to suck my cock, would he like to lick Michelle’s pussy, or Sadie’s?

“Come closer,” Sadie said, and I positioned myself over her, my cock long and hard between those amazing tits. Michelle said, “You’ve got a really big dick, Nico. That is one seriously big cock,” and I wanted her to kiss me the way she kissed Rory, but I knew what Sadie wanted, what she was offering me, and I focused on her instead.

Sadie pushed her breasts together and I felt her warm wetness on both sides. I started to move my hips and it felt really good, my cock between Sadie’s hot, slick tits. We were Michelle’s show, the way she watched me fuck Sadie, her eyes narrowed and lips parted. I could see her tongue moving slightly, just little

pulses, like she was imagining her mouth teasing my tip, tasting me.

Sadie only smiled, a lazy one, too high to do much more than that. I said to her, “I love fucking you.”

“Maybe one day we can do more. We’ll need to practice. I’ve got a tight, little pussy.”

I moaned. I loved the way she talked. I loved it when girls talk about their pussies with pride.

“Show him,” Michelle said. “Show us that pussy of yours.”

Sadie kissed the air in Michelle’s direction, and Michelle grabbed Sadie’s tits in response, her hands so close to my cock, but barely touching it. I stood up to let Sadie wiggle out of her jeans. She was wearing hot pink panties with a lacy waistband. Robbie would have loved those. “Off, off,” Michelle said, reaching for Sadie’s underpants, but Sadie pushed Michelle’s hands away. She lifted her ass from the leather of the sofa and slipped them off, pulling her knees to her chest, and then untangling them from around her ankles.

“Look,” Michelle said, touching Sadie’s thigh to part her legs. She had short, light brown hair over her cunt. It looked soft. Michelle spread Sadie’s pussy lips with her silvered fingers, and we both saw how pink she was, glistening with wetness.

I asked Michelle, “What does she taste like?”

“Ohh—FUCK!” That was Rory. We turned to watch him thrusting his hips up off the chair. John was grabbing Rory’s ass, with Rory’s cock buried somewhere deep in his throat. Soon, Rory was panting, short, little breaths, and John lifted his head and got to his feet. Rory’s eyes were closed, and he leaned forward in the chair, his loose body collapsing into John’s waiting arms. I wondered what Rory’s come tasted like. I wanted to know what *everyone* tasted like. If I kissed John now, I would know how Rory tasted.

“Anyway,” Michelle said, and I turned back to the girls. “This pussy may be a tight one, but it’s always a wet one. Let me

tell you how it tastes.”

Sadie first sat properly on the couch, and then slid her hips forward into a slouch, spreading her pale legs, her tiny thighs. Michelle kneeled between them, her hands rubbing over those beautiful tits I had fucked, slick with lube. She lowered her head between Sadie’s legs, her long, curly hair falling from her shoulders toward her face. Sadie watched me, my hands at my sides, my cock flinching up and down, even though no one was touching it. “Fuck,” she said, and then she started to moan, to rock her hips forward and back against Michelle’s mouth.

Michelle turned to look at me. She said, “Lift my skirt.”

I looked at Sadie. She smiled—I was seriously starting to love her smile, the lazy, sexy way she looked at me—and nodded. I dropped to my knees and moved toward Michelle, my hands shaking slightly as I lifted her plaid skirt to reveal her naked ass, the folds of her hairless pussy. Michelle said, “Her cunt may be tight, but mine isn’t.” Michelle turned back to Sadie, and I watched as she used both hands to spread Sadie’s pussy, watched as she tapped her thumb against Sadie’s clit, watched as Sadie bucked her hips forward in response, and I wondered how often these two did this.

Michelle went back to eating Sadie’s pussy, and I rubbed Michelle’s ass with both hands, slowly working my way to her cunt, telling myself that no, Hannah didn’t need to know, and, yes, Michelle had kind of given me permission. I ran two of my fingers over Michelle’s wet pussy and brought them to my lips. First, I licked, then I sucked. She tasted salty. She smelled really good.

I had one hand on Michelle’s lower back and the other on my cock, watching Sadie writhe on that couch, lifting her hips and squeezing her shiny tits. She was so close and I was so close, so I brushed the tip of my cock against Michelle’s wet cunt, and she moaned into Sadie’s pussy, and that sent Sadie off, her mouth open and eyes closed and head forced back into the sofa. She was loud, but not in a porn star way. She was loud because she was loving it.

She was loud because she couldn't help herself.

I was pushing into Michelle when Rory grabbed me by my hair. He brought his face close to mine. He said, "What are you doing there, sexy boy? Are you gonna fuck that naked pussy?"

I was just barely inside her. The way Rory held me, I couldn't really move my head to the right, but I could raise my eyes to Sadie. She was out of it, rubbing her hands over her tits and stomach, satisfied, relaxed.

Rory grew impatient. He grabbed tighter and gave my head a little push with his fist, which made his grip on me hurt more. "Well?"

I said, "Yeah. Yeah, I'm gonna fuck her."

"Then show me what that cock can do," Rory said.

Michelle had turned her head to watch me and Rory, to take little peeks at what she could see of my cock moving inside her. She said, "Fuck me, Nico. Fuck me with that dick."

Okay, Michelle sounded like a porn star, but I didn't care. I grabbed her hips and thrust inside her, my hard cock in her softness, her wetness, with Rory's hand still hard in my hair. She wasn't that tight, but she was tight enough, and I pushed in as far as I could go. Michelle let out a moan, a more genuine sound, and Sadie was watching us now, with my cock fucking her friend, and Rory grabbing me and saying, "Fuck that pussy, Nico. Fuck that pussy and let that pussy fuck you," I think because Michelle was thrusting, too, her ass moving back to smack against my skin. I fucked and I fucked and I listened to what Nico said about my dick and Michelle's pussy and about how my balls looked so tight and didn't I just want to blow my load, didn't I just want to shoot inside that cunt. That's when I felt Michelle's pussy get tighter, and she started moaning in a way that made me wonder if I was hurting her, but then a sound erupted from her throat and I knew it was only because she was coming. That's when I felt it, when I knew I was going to come, and I pulled out of Michelle, and Rory took over then, grabbed my cock far more gently than he did my

hair. I wasn't expecting that, but his pressure was just right, and he moved his hand at exactly the right pace, and *I thought Rory fucking Brodeur is jerking me off*, and he said, "Let me see it, let me see it," and he moved my cock so that I shot straight up onto my chest, with a little on my chin and neck, and I had one hand on Michelle and the other on Rory's stomach, just to keep myself steady. I felt like I would melt, like all the heat in my body would take over and I couldn't stop it—no way.

There was applause. It was John clapping his hands, still sitting in the red chair, dick limp. He said, "Well done, children! Well done! Now. Come and help Daddy."

SADIE AND I BAILED. I grabbed my clothes, and we both went to the little red bathroom in the hall. She was still naked, except for her oversized sweatshirt, which she hugged around her body. "I hate it when he does the daddy thing. It kind of creeps me out."

"Are you over here a lot?" I asked, shaking my underpants free from my jeans.

"Would it be weird if I peed?" she asked me, pointing to the toilet, with the most amazing crinkle in her nose. It made me realize that I had pressed my dick against her tits, but I hadn't kissed her yet.

I stepped into my boxers. "No. It totally wouldn't be weird."

"Good," she said and sat, holding her sweatshirt up around her waist. "We're not here as often as Rory, but Rory gets lots of stuff for Michelle—drug stuff—and I typically come along for the ride. She's my best friend."

I pushed my arms through my T-shirt, then pulled it over my head. "Do you go to our school?"

"No," Sadie said, spinning the roll of toilet paper on its holder, tearing some off. "I go to Our Lady of Lourdes."

"That Catholic school? On the east side?" I asked. I was still standing in my boxers.

“Funny, right? But, yeah. I go to Catholic school because my mom went to Catholic school, and my dad went to Catholic school, and my older sister went to Catholic school, if you see where I’m going.”

“Bummer,” I said. I suddenly felt like I had nothing left to say, with Sadie not going to my school, but to a kind of ritzy one that was a 20-minute bus ride from mine. I wasn’t sure if she wanted to hang out after this, to see if we could be friends, and wouldn’t that be harder if we were in different schools?

Sadie did want to hang out, though. She gave me her cell number and took mine. She told me I could text whenever I wanted, and would I like to go to an all-ages show at the YMCA next week? I told her I would. “Of course,” I said. “Totally.” She escorted me quietly past John and Rory and Michelle, with Rory and Michelle on their knees, taking turns sucking and licking John’s cock. John had his hands on their heads, and Rory was making “Mm” noises, like he was eating the best snack ever, and Michelle was talking all dirty porn through lips that were no longer that red. Sadie gave me a look that made me cover my mouth to keep from laughing, and, at the door, in only her unzipped sweatshirt, she kissed my lips and I kissed hers. The whole time this happened, all I could think was that I wanted it to happen again. Over and over again.

ALL WEEK LONG AT SCHOOL, Hannah avoided me. All week long, she turned her head and didn’t make eye contact, or she scowled and sneered and *then* turned away, and I was left to sit by myself at lunch, at least when Rory wasn’t around to eat my pizza crusts and belch really loudly after drinking a whole container of chocolate milk in what had to be record time. (I was kind of over him.) I wanted to talk to Hannah because I missed talking to her. I wanted to tell her about Sadie, but somehow leave out the best friends with Michelle McMahon part, because I knew what that would bring. I wanted Sadie to have a fair shot.

I also wanted to ask her about Robbie: how Robbie was doing, and was he okay, and were those kids still giving him trouble at school. I wanted to ask Hannah if we could maybe all go to the mall again—me and her and Kayden and Robbie—because I missed hanging out. That’s what I would say, *I miss hanging out*, when what I really meant was *I think Robbie is really rad and I kind of miss him a lot*.

On Thursday, I went to find this out for myself. After school, I took the subway to the stop near Robbie’s school. I walked the rest of the way. I got there with just enough time to sit on the steps and text my mom: *Don’t be worried, but I might get in a fight today*.

Mom responded right away by calling. “Where are you?” she asked. She sounded upset, which she had been since Liz left this weekend, but this was a different type.

I told her where I was, and that I was waiting for Robbie.

Mom said, “That’s Hannah’s brother, right?”

I let that question roll around in my head. “Brother” seemed like a weird word for Robbie all of a sudden. I told her yes.

“So, my fourteen-year-old son is going to fight elementary school kids for some reason?” she asked.

“If I have to, I will seriously mess these kids up, Mom. But there might be more of them than me and Robbie, so that’s why I wanted to tell you. Just in case.”

My mom sighed. “Why don’t you come home right now. Just come home, Nico.”

“I’ll come home with Robbie, but not without him.” I was looking down at my right hand, at my knuckles. I had never thrown a punch before, ever.

There was silence for a while, and then the school bell rang. I could hear the shuffling from behind the front glass doors, the rush of many feet filling the hallways, so many voices almost all at once. “He should be coming now. I’ll be home as soon as I can.”

“Let’s talk more about this whole thing tonight,” Mom said.

“You need to tell me more—the whole story.”

“Okay, okay. I’ve got to go.” I moved to the side of the stairs and pressed my back against the railing, my eyes on the front doors.

My mom said, “I love you,” and then I hung up. For some reason, I felt like that was her permission.

There were tons of little kids and some bigger kids, from first graders to sixth graders. Robbie was in fifth. Everyone had a high voice, for the most part, the boys and the girls. Everyone who passed me, they sounded the same. I could only tell the gender of who was talking by looking at their faces. I waited and waited, and for a while, I wondered if Robbie was home sick or something. But then he appeared, and at first I didn’t recognize him, because what I was expecting was him and his long, brown hair, but what I saw was Robbie with a buzz cut.

He noticed me right away. I didn’t even have to say anything. His smile got really big, and he took the steps toward me.

He had remnants of a black eye and a split lower lip that had mostly healed. There was more scabbing on his upper lip, right up to his nose, where it looked like he had met with some pavement.

“Hi!” he said. “Why are you here?”

I stared at him, at his big brown eyes and his beautiful mouth that had been through way too much, had felt all the wrong things, because what Robbie’s mouth deserved to feel was kisses and the smooth, soft application of any color of lipstick he wanted. And there was the shock of his hair, of it gone, of it only a quarter of an inch on his head all around.

I said, “What happened to your hair?”

He looked embarrassed, lowering his eyes. He rubbed a hand over it, and I saw the cuts on his palm. “Nothing. Mom wanted me to cut it.”

“Oh,” I said. “I like it.”

“No you don’t,” Robbie said. He grabbed me by the arm of my coat and led us down the stairs until we were walking side by side on the sidewalk. I took a look around us. There was no one waiting.

“It’s different,” I said. “But I like it.”

“I hate it,” he said with a heavy scowl. It looked just like Hannah’s, the one she had shown me all week.

“It’ll grow back. It’ll be all right.”

“This time, it can grow so it’s all one length and I won’t have to have bangs.” This idea perked him up a bit. He gave me a sly smile.

I said, “Hannah told me about the fight.”

Robbie looked straight ahead. We had stopped at a crosswalk. “Yeah,” he said.

“That’s fucked up. I’m really sorry.” I took my hat off my head and looked inside at nothing. Then I put it back on. I felt nervous. I was so happy to see him, and I felt nervous.

Robbie said, “It’s okay,” and he tilted his head and squeezed the lobe on his right ear, like he was feeling for an earring.

“Do you have to go home right now?”

“Yeah,” he said. He wasn’t looking at me anymore. “I do.”

“Can you come home with me instead?” There was something in my voice right then, and it made Robbie turn to look at me curiously. “Can you use my phone to call Hannah or your mom and tell them you’re with me, that you’re coming over for dinner or something? That you’re okay and safe with me?”

This came out in a rush, and I think I had said all I wanted to. I had said everything, except that I had missed him.

Robbie looked at me then. People were walking around us to cross the street, with the white Walk sign and the repetitive tone sounding for the blind. “You want me to come to your house?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said, and I didn’t care who or what was around us,

with the people on the sidewalks and the people in the cars and the people looking out their windows from the tall, storied buildings above us, but I took hold of his hands. They were cold and dry. He looked at my hands over his, and then he smiled. “You’re a good boy, Nico,” he said. “You know exactly what to say. You know exactly how to treat someone like me.”