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ALEX GINO

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# CHAPTER ONE

I can see the Statue of Liberty from my bedroom window. I'm not trying to brag. It's just true. My view is of New York Bay, with New Jersey sprawled out on the left side, downtown Manhattan poking up into the sky on the right, and between them, there she is, Lady Liberty. She's not close enough to be able to see her face clearly without binoculars, but she's an unmistakable green spot in the water.

"She has seven spikes on her crown," I told TJ as we lay on my bed one afternoon, leaning our elbows on the windowsill. "Some people say it's to match the seven continents or the seven seas. Other people say it's supposed to be the rays of the sun, but then why would there be seven of them? And she's in the water. It's gotta be the seas."

TJ looked at me with one eyebrow raised and one lowered.

“Since when are you an expert on the Statue of Liberty?”

“Since I watched a video online with Jess.”

TJ’s dark hair fell onto their forehead in perfect ringlets that barely reached their thick-framed glasses. They wore black jeans and a magenta button-down shirt that brought out the rosy hint of their angular, tan face. As for me, I wore one of my many black T-shirts that Mom said washed out my round, pale face. My dirty-blond-turning-to-brown hair was cut shorter than I would have liked, the effects of an unpleasant gender experiment that I was still waiting to grow out. My shirt was from Joe & Pat’s, hands down the best pizza place on Staten Island. According to my hands anyway. TJ’s family swore by Nunzio’s.

We lived on Staten Island, the forgotten borough of New York City. Staten Island is nearly the size of Brooklyn, but with one-fifth the population. Home of the Verrazzano-Narrows Bridge, the minor league Yankees, and, of course, the Staten Island Ferry. In other words, a place known for ways to leave it. And if you’ve ever seen a map of New York where there’s a little bump in the bottom-left corner that the mapmaker didn’t bother drawing the rest of—just enough to let the ferry dock before it heads back to Manhattan—that’s the little bit of Staten Island we lived on.

“Okay. If you know everything about the Statue of Liberty, which hand is the book in?” TJ asked.

“Easy. Her left.”

“Are you *sure*?”

“One hundred percent.”

“But how can you *know*?”

“Because she’s holding the torch with her right.”

“You’re good! Most people get tripped up when you ask them about details like that. I’ll bet my dad doesn’t even know.” TJ’s dad was a trivia buff as well as a professional chef.

“Yeah, well, your dad doesn’t have a personal view.”

TJ’s family lived in a house a block away, and their bedroom view was of their backyard, a patchy green square with a large oak tree filling up the center. My building was five stories tall, plus a basement, so technically, we lived in a penthouse, but really, it was just a regular two-bedroom apartment in an old brick building—141 St. Mark’s Place. Apartment 5-C. I hadn’t been able to say my address without it singsonging out of my mouth ever since I was little and had to memorize it along with Mom’s cell phone number just in case I got lost. *ONE-forty-onnnnne, ST.! MARK’S! PLACE! a-PART-ment, FIIIIIVE CEEEEEE.*

I told TJ more of what I’d learned. “There are three hundred fifty-four steps up to the top. Well, to her crown anyway. No one’s been allowed to climb to the top of the torch since she got hit with shrapnel from an explosion around World War I.”

“Why do you keep calling them *she* anyway? How do you know what pronouns a statue uses?” TJ is the only person I know who’s more careful about pronouns than I am.

“Well, she is called *Lady Liberty*,” I pointed out.

“Not all ladies are women.”

“True, they could be a nonbinary drag queen! They are wearing a tiara, after all.”

“Now *that* would be amazing!” TJ stood and put my baseball hat on their head, with the bill popped up. They grabbed a unicorn coloring book to hold in their left arm and raised a pencil in their right. “No puny gender can hold me back! I am no mere man or woman. I am Mx. Liberty, and I light the way for you!”

TJ and I were the only nonbinary kids in our grade—at least as far as we knew. That’s not why we were best friends, and being best friends wasn’t why we were both enby, no matter what TJ’s grandmother thought. It was just one of many things we had in common. We both lived on the same street, loved graphic novels, and thought the pop star Miss Chris was the coolest ever. We always had something to talk about, and when we didn’t, our silence was the comfortable kind. We loved to make boxed mac ’n’ cheese together (gluten-free because TJ was allergic to wheat) and eat it with tiny fish forks in candlelight, pretending it was the fanciest item on the menu at the chichiest French restaurant. We were even

both born in October, and the previous year, we'd had a combination Halloween birthday party in TJ's backyard.

My phone barked. Technically, it was the alarm set to a barking ringtone, but either way, it was dog-walking time. The pug, Nacious, lived downstairs with Ms. Hansen, an old woman with short white hair and a friendly laugh. Ms. Hansen gave Nacious her daily walks, but TJ and I were responsible for taking her out on Sundays to really tire her out.

"Ready?" I asked TJ, who jumped up in response. They liked Nacious more than I did. TJ loved all dogs, even the big and growly ones. They said it was all in the eyes. I said I was a cat person, but I made exceptions, especially for dogs like Nacious who weren't very doglike at all.

We raced down the stairs to Ms. Hansen's first-floor apartment. Ms. Hansen didn't have a view of the Statue of Liberty, since her windows were too close to the ground to see the water. All she could see was the back of the building behind us.

Ms. Hansen met us at the door with Nacious already on her leash. We grabbed some tennis balls and set out down the block for the yard next to the stone church, with its hill that we made Nacious run up and down as we tossed the tennis ball at each other. Neither of us had very good aim, but luckily, Nacious liked to run after the ball and bring it back to TJ for tug-of-war. She knew not to bring it to me. Maybe

she was happy. Or maybe she was frustrated. It was hard to say. Like I said, I wasn't really a dog person.

We walked back to 141 St. Mark's Place with Nacious. I knew every crack in the walkway to the entrance, the musty smell of the mailbox area in the outer lobby, and the number of stairs between each floor. I thought I knew a lot about the place, but I had no idea there was history to be discovered.

And not just any history. Queer history.