

DRAG TEEN

a tale of angst and wigs

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PUSH

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To Eric Gilliland for the roof, the walls,
and the endless support

chapter *ONE*

THIS ISN'T ONE OF THOSE stories about a heartwarming journey toward accepting my cursed homosexual identity. No. First of all, being gay is *far* from a curse. It's more like an extra order of fries at Wendy's because the lady in the window isn't paying attention while she fills your bag. It's awesome.

If there's one thing I've struggled to accept about myself, it's my body. (And that might change, if I stopped eating at Wendy's so much.) Being gay is, in fact, one of the only things I actually like about myself. I've been gay since birth. I've never contemplated the alternative. Literally can't. I have an enormous imagination. But, still, there are limits.

Specifically there are limits if you live in Clearwater, Florida, like I do. Ever been to Clearwater? Spoiler alert: The water isn't that clear. And the town itself? Even murkier.

When my drag teen story started in earnest, I'd been stuck in Clearwater for all seventeen years of my life. But I had big dreams—to maybe someday become a writer or something. I also liked to sing . . . but you can't really say “I dream of growing up to be a singer” without looking like a total lunatic

giving a reality show confessional, despite there being zero cameras in sight.

Honestly, though, my dreams never really went much further than the simple hope of getting out of Florida, away from my family, and to somewhere where I could be myself without a single second thought.

This, of course, would require me to figure out who “myself” actually was.

Nobody in my family had ever left Clearwater; none of them had even gone to college. Both my parents grew up in Florida, and their parents grew up in Florida, and their parents, and so on. My great-great-granddad owned some orange groves and had the choice to sell them either to somebody who wanted to open a drive-in movie theater or to some weird guy named Walt Disney. He went with the first option. Which meant that by the time my dad was born, the only money my family had was what they made at the gas station they ran in the middle of town. My granddad passed away when I was really young and left the business to Dad, so I grew up right there pumping gas and cleaning windshields. Up until I was fifteen and discovered cologne, I smelled like gasoline on a daily basis. Now I smelled like whatever scent was on sale at CVS.

I was 100 percent certain that in order for me to get out of Florida and stay out of Florida, I'd need to go off to college. The only problem was that no one in my family had any intention of helping me do such a thing.

Luckily I had another support system that actually believed in the merits of being supportive: Heather, my best friend since

first grade. Unlike me, Heather was the kind of loud and opinionated person who would either end up hosting a daytime talk show or being someone's wacky aunt. Still, despite her outward personality and parental advantage, Heather was just as much of a mess as me. Which is why our friendship worked so well. We were the kind of outcasts they don't make teen movies about. Heather was funny, biting, sarcastic, and had a variety of beautiful features, but none of them really went together, and her weight problems were even worse than mine, which meant she turned to her big personality to distract the judgmental eyes of our peers.

We spent most of our time dwelling in the nothingness our town had to offer. The afternoon I'm going to focus on here was like pretty much any other day of our summer. By which I mean, the air was weighted with thick Florida humidity and snarky teenage boredom.

"What should we do today?" I asked. We were in our favorite spot, a little group of old lawn chairs we kept on the roof of the apartment building I'd lived in my whole life. We weren't supposed to be up there, but the landlords didn't complain as long as my parents didn't complain that our ceiling leaked so much we could have opened a water park and charged admission. And then I guess we could have paid to fix the ceiling ourselves.

"Besides pathetically wait for enough time to pass until we can logically eat lunch again?" Heather asked. "What time is Seth getting out of work?"

Seth was my boyfriend. He'd moved to town in ninth grade from Maryland, and we'd been boyfriends from the day we'd

met. Seth was all sorts of out of my league, to say the least. His adorable features, perfect body, and wavy blond hair made him look like a cartoon version of an attractive teenager. Plus, he fit in. He was the “cool gay kid” at school, the gay guy everyone wants to be friends with because it gives them the latest must-have fall accessory. Oh, and also because he was genuinely nice and stuff.

I imagined Seth as one of those annoying people who came out of the womb knowing who he was and had never doubted it since. I never saw him worry about what other people might think. But then again, I assumed I wouldn't care that much if I'd never weighed over one hundred fifty pounds and had the kind of abs that just appear for no good reason. This fit into my theory about people with effortless abs and how they must have done something really selfless in a past life—those abs had to be God's way of saying *Psssst . . . Hey, you! I'm sorry*. Even if this theory didn't hold, Seth had the kind of confidence I doubted I'd ever find in myself. I suppose that was one of the many things that drew me to him. To me, the ability to be comfortable enough in your own skin—to actually *like* yourself—was about as foreign as understanding football.

Being a gay kid in this decade of equality and anti-bullying and all that stuff that gay celebrities liked to talk about on TV had so many advantages, but one of the biggest disadvantages was that I couldn't blame why I felt like an outsider on being gay anymore. Gay was in, but that didn't mean that all gay people were. Seth was *very* in. I, however, suspected that I never would be.

My mom's voice howled from downstairs. "JT? Can you come down here?"

She was calling from the kitchen window right below our feet. I could smell the cigarette smoke and hear the incessant yapping of Li'l Biscuit, her eight-year-old Maltese and Chihuahua mix, who hated everyone that wasn't my mom or bacon.

"Coming."

We lived on the top floor of the three-story building, which they had the audacity to call a *penthouse* even though it was still just a two-bedroom apartment with a kitchen the size of most refrigerators. When I got downstairs, leaving Heather to keep watch of the six-pack of Dr Pepper we'd brought up to the roof, I found Mom squeezed in the small space between the countertop and wall, fanning some freshly microwaved Bagel Bites that were bubbling like lava on a smoky paper plate.

"I need you to work tonight," she said. It was not phrased in the form of a question.

She meant work at the gas station, a job I got stuck with countless times even though I rarely got paid.

"Where's Crystal?"

"Her boyfriend's in jail again, and she's got to go to night court."

"But, Mom, I'm hanging out with Seth tonight. It's his only night off all weekend—"

"You tell your friend that you have to help your parents. That gas station is what puts food on our table, JT."

She spoke these words while blowing on the steaming microwaved mini-pizzas she'd purchased on clearance from the Dollar General store with absolutely zero trace of irony.

“First of all, he’s not my friend. He’s my boyfriend. And he has been for the past three and a half years.”

Mom sucked her cigarette and popped a Bagel Bite into her mouth before she even exhaled the cigarette smoke. I winced at the thought of the complicated taste.

“Whatever he is, you’re canceling. I really need you tonight.”

“Why can’t you cover for Crystal?”

“Because your father and I work all day every day to keep a roof over your head, and we deserve some time to relax. That’s why.” She tossed the unflattering polo shirt at me. “You start at six.”

Before I could say another word, Mom was stretched out on the sofa with the plate of Bagel Bites and a whimpering Li'l Biscuit resting on her small hill of a belly.

Sometimes I imagined tossing the gas station uniform in the trash, walking out the door, and never coming back. It wasn't that my parents were horrible people. They didn't hate me, but they didn't appear to be big fans, either. They didn't get me, didn't know any better. They knew only their own world, and had no intention of ever learning anything otherwise. That was the problem with home for me, the lack of otherwise.

When I was a little kid, my grandmother, Nana, would tell me that I was born for big things. Nana was one of the biggest personalities I'd ever met. Loud, the best listener, brutally honest—plus she claimed to have psychic powers. While the only proof of this was the time she predicted my father would have the gout by the time he turned fifty, I always believed that there was

something special about Nana. She had seen things, been places, accomplished stuff. And even years after Nana was gone, I still heard her voice in my head, telling me not to give up, to keep trying for something great, to find my otherwise.

First, I had to get wise to just what that “other” might be.