

Peter is throwing his town's first drag show.
Whether they like it or not.

"PAINFULLY RELATABLE AND BITINGLY FUNNY . . .
A TIMELY TALE OF FRIENDSHIP, SELF-ACCEPTANCE,
AND THE IMPORTANCE OF PROPER CONTOURING."
—KEVIN CHRISTOPHER SNIPES, author of *Milo and
Marcos at the End of the World*

Peter Thompkin needs a public image overhaul. After clashing with the most popular gay kid in his small-town high school, the rumors about him are becoming more elaborate by the day. To prove he isn't a self-hating gay, Peter decides to help his best friend Alan (a.k.a. teen drag queen Aggie Culture) produce Mason County's first drag extravaganza. In the process, he finds himself facing down angry guard dogs, angrier bigots, and a very high-strung church lady.

As backlash grows, Peter wonders whether his plan will blow up in his face. Even worse, his friendship with Alan might not survive past curtain call . . .

US \$15.99 / CDN \$18.99
ISBN 978-1-77321-788-8



Also available as an e-book

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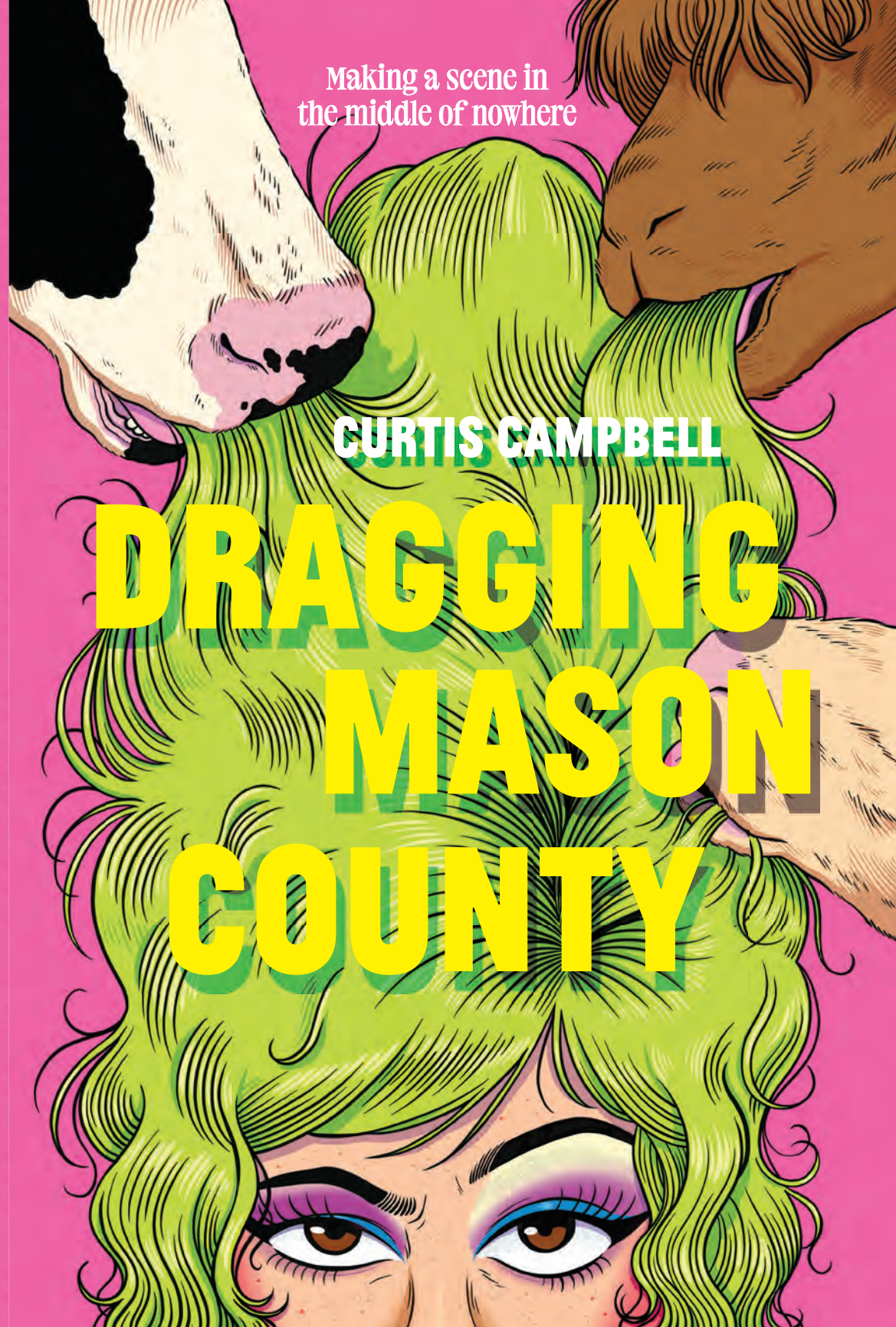
CAMPBELL
DRAGGING MASON COUNTY

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Making a scene in
the middle of nowhere

CURTIS CAMPBELL

DRAGGING MASON COUNTY



PRAISE FOR DRAGGING MASON COUNTY

"Hold on to your wigs! *Dragging Mason County* serves a hilarious, heartwarming story of acceptance and bravery, all while boasting a sickening cast of characters with charisma, uniqueness, nerve, and talent to spare."

—ERIK J. BROWN, author of *Lose You to Find Me* and *All That's Left in the World*

"With biting humor and big personalities, *Dragging Mason County* serves up enough memorable one-liners to fill an entire season of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. But at its shiny, sequin-loving heart, there's an emotionally tender story about learning how to fully accept who you are . . . and celebrate it as well."

—BRIAN D. KENNEDY, author of *A Little Bit Country*

"*Dragging Mason County* is a timely book about a small town grappling with its humanity. This gem of a novel is chock-full of humor, heart, and hairspray. A worthy and important debut."

—BONNIE-SUE HITCHCOCK, author of *The Smell of Other People's Houses* and *Everyone Dies Famous in a Small Town*

"I loved Peter's personal journey of self-discovery, navigating the challenges of prejudice and intolerance while producing the gaggiest drag show his county has ever seen. *Dragging Mason County* is an empowering young adult novel that celebrates the vibrant spirit of queer individuals, advocacy in a digital age, and the transformative magic of drag."

—BOMBAE, from *Canada's Drag Race*

"A hilarious romp through small town drag. The 'face' of this book is all sequins and glitter, but behind the shiny exterior is a story about messy, fraught friendship and self-discovery."

—TANYA BOTEJU, author of *Kings, Queens, and In-Betweens* and *Bruised*

"Painfully relatable and bitingly funny, *Dragging Mason County* is a timely tale of friendship, self-acceptance, and the importance of proper contouring."

—**KEVIN CHRISTOPHER SNIPES**, author of *Milo and Marcos at the End of the World*

"A book filled with big heels, big laughs, and a big heart. *Dragging Mason County* reminds us about the importance of community, the need for visibility—regardless of where you live—and the courage it takes to be yourself."

—**BRIAN FRANCIS**, author of *Fruit*

"Literally every single page is overflowing with hilariously sharp, sassy, and shocking prose—making the amount of times I found myself giggling like a lunatic, screaming 'Oh my GOD' impossible to count. Make *Dragging Mason County* part of your self-care routine."

—**MARK SAMUAL BONANNO**, writer and performer of *Aunty Donna*

"*Dragging Mason County* is like a good drag show: fun, messy, celebratory, and over much too soon. Peter and the queens of The House of Rural Realness show us how much a positive queer space means to people, especially young people."

—**DANI JANSON**, author of *The Year Shakespeare Ruined My Life*

"Fast, witty, and full of heart . . . Come for the snappy dialogue and an acerbic wit so cutting it's almost lethal—stay for the surprisingly complex and tender heart underneath."

—**ALEXANDRA MAE JONES**, author of *The Queen of Junk Island*

"*Dragging Mason County* feels like the teenage love child of David Sedaris and John Waters. Smart, funny, relevant, and ultimately touching."

—**DANIEL MacIVOR**, award-winning playwright and performer

"A sharp and startlingly timely story about drag's ability to transform not just a person, but a community."

—**ANTHONY OLIVEIRA**, GLAAD Media Award–winning author

CURTIS CAMPBELL

**DRAGGING
MASON
COUNTY**



© 2023 Curtis Campbell (text)

Cover art by Jenn Woodall, designed by Sam Tse

Interior design and typesetting by Rachel Nam

Edited by Khary Mathurin

Copy edited by Mary Ann Blair

Proofread by Anne Fullerton

Annick Press Ltd.

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We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council, and the participation of the Government of Canada/la participation du gouvernement du Canada for our publishing activities.

Canada



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO
an Ontario government agency
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Dragging Mason County / Curtis Campbell.

Names: Campbell, Curtis (Author of Dragging Mason County), author.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20230169120 | Canadiana (ebook) 20230169260

| ISBN 9781773217871

(hardcover) | ISBN 9781773217888 (softcover) | ISBN 9781773217895

(HTML) | ISBN 9781773217901 (PDF)

Classification: LCC PS8605.A54295 D73 2023 | DDC jC813/.6—dc23

Published in the U.S.A. by Annick Press (U.S.) Ltd.

Distributed in Canada by University of Toronto Press.

Distributed in the U.S.A. by Publishers Group West.

Printed in Canada

annickpress.com

Also available as an e-book. Please visit annickpress.com/ebooks for more details.

CHAPTER ONE

MIDDLE-AGED MAN-BABY

“This was a terrible idea,” I inform Alan. “You know how I feel about mixing with the locals.”

The parking lot of the Dairy Freeze is radiating heat, and we’re caged in on either side by souped-up pickup trucks. Alan Goode and I don’t fit the *quaint small-town life* profile on a good day, but in his short-shorts and coiffed hair, Alan sticks out like a gay thumb. It’s drawing the attention of the girl sitting in the truck bed of her lofty war machine of a vehicle. The scrutinizing glare of Chrissy McPhee, wealthiest member of Mason Central Secondary’s ruling class, is as familiar as it is unwanted. I’m sure that plenty of guys in Mason County would love to be ogled by a girl with the keys to her own all-terrain vehicle, but I just want to bat her attention away with my notably limp wrists.

“Look, I’ve always been *very* fashion forward, Peter,” Alan replies. “And if people can’t handle it, then that’s between them and their god.”

“Fashion requires wearing clothing,” I say, wiping sweat from my eyes. “Your short-shorts barely count as fabric.”

I try not to look at Chrissy, knowing that she's got more than a few opinions on the way that Alan's nipples are nearly busting out of the T-shirt he recently whittled into a stringy tank top. Chrissy is tiny, even from the top of her mecha-truck, but she has the legs of a volleyball player, so it always feels like she's about to kick a hole through your chest. Her blonde hair is chemically rigid, and her pinched face always seems to be scanning you for structural weaknesses. Which is exactly what I can feel it doing right now.

From the corner of my eye I catch a second head bobbing out from behind Chrissy. The line moves forward a touch and I pray that Brison Dallas, gay best friend to Chrissy McPhee, remains silent on the topic of our physical appearances for once in his life. Alan and I look like gay kids in a gritty indie movie about plucky rural queers winning a poetry competition. Brison Dallas, on the other hand, looks like a model kick-starting his acting career in a movie about a teen werewolf hunter.

Alan's skin may be clear and porcelain, given his meticulous nighttime skincare routine, but mine is an oozing mess. My face is a perpetual *before* picture in those late-night skin-treatment commercials. Alan, on the other hand, is fat. He says this proudly, never shying away from the word in a crusade to *destigmatize rotundness*. Alan is also the kind of tall that involves ducking through doorways and shopping at specialty stores. My own drooping belly sits below a set of wibbly T-Rex arms and what Alan often describes (in a froggy French accent) as my *li'l floppy tiddies*. At which point he flips both of them like a hamburger and makes a satisfied sizzling sound. Alan has a swooping mane of hair, while my hairline has already begun to consider retirement. My round face gives me the features of an old baby and my terrible posture makes me look like an old man. Think of me as a middle-aged man-baby. I know I do. All of this is to say that Alan and I are not the six-packed gays you see selling supplements while you're scrolling through Poster.

"Oh!" Alan says, lighting up and waving. "Hi, Chrissy, hi, Brison!"

I look toward the truck only to discover that, yes, Brison does have a single eyebrow raised in a galling exhibition of his typical smugger.

Chrissy waves with an icy titter.

“I hate them,” I hiss.

“I know, baby,” Alan tuts with motherly concern. He lays his hand between my shoulder blades before realizing his mistake and wiping the sweat off his hand using what little bit of surface area his shorts can afford him. The line ahead of us moves, and it’s a relief to disappear from view behind the comically oversized tires of the Mad Max truck to my left.

“And I don’t get why you’re so nice to them,” I continue.

“I’m not *nice*,” Alan explains. “I’m just cordial.”

“They’re not nice to *you*, Alan. You don’t need to be nice to them.”

I remind him of this despite knowing exactly why Alan continues to offer them a good-natured smile. Alan changes the subject with as much subtlety as his short-shorts.

“I have big news, Peter,” Alan announces grandly. “Please don’t let your silly little schoolyard grumbles spoil my day.”

“I resent that characterization. And, what, did you finally get that piece of popcorn out of your teeth?”

“No,” he sighs. “But I have named her Poppy and made my peace with her. I will have you know that you are looking at someone who has recently had a post liked by drag royalty.”

I say nothing and scan the menu board.

“Drag royalty, Peter!” Alan presses.

I search for something to say but come up empty. It’s not that I hate drag. I just have no opinion on the matter. I consider myself dragnostic. Alan not only loves drag but loves *doing* drag. But to me, drag is a lot like playing the cello or doing the math with all the triangles. I can respect the amount of skill, craft, and determination that goes into it without getting any joy from the result. Not to mention the fact that doing drag just paints another target on your back. This target just happens to be painted with eyeliner.

“Fine,” I comply. “What internet drag superstar has descended from the heavens to heart your offerings?”

“None other,” Alan announces, “than Tess Tosterone!”

“Who?”

Alan slaps me on the arm, which to him is playful and to anyone on the receiving end is bruise inducing.

“Tess Tosterone is only the winner of *Dragathon* 2017, Peter. Largely considered one of the best seasons of the show, if not *the* best season by many notable media critics.”

Dragathon is the Super Bowl for people dressing in wigs and heels. It’s a competition show where drag queens from across the globe are selected to compete against one another in weekly performances before someone gets eliminated by the judges. Whoever is left standing at the very end is given a big golden crown and wins a bunch of money and sponsorship deals. *Dragathon* is massively popular, and weekly screenings at drag venues have become standing appointments for queers the world over. Unless you live in the middle of nowhere, like Mason, in the heart of Mason County. Alan is always showing me videos of drag brunch screenings, where queens in massive wigs and drawn-on eyebrows screen the show over eggs Benedict and mimosas while pouring pitchers of water over their fake boobs. Then Alan will sigh longingly and wish aloud that he could go to an event like that.

Because there is nowhere in Mason to actually perform. Alan performs on video and uploads it to YouTube. He’s even pretty good at what he does. By the time Alan is done doing his makeup, wig, nails, and accoutrements, he has transformed into a statuesque woman named Aggie Culture. She even has a decent following on Poster.

Alan and, by extension, Aggie Culture, loves country music. While I spend most of my time online trying to find music and movies that bring a little bit of the real world into the hick-state dystopia that is Mason, Alan can’t get enough of the local musical cuisine. His first Poster video was a mashup of “You Shook Me All Night Long” and “Ring of Fire.” Somehow Alan manages to be from a different planet while still being the perfect product of the Mason County cultural slop bucket. Don’t let anyone tell

you that Alan Goode doesn't contain multitudes.

Alan grabs my arm in shock. "Oh my god. Who is *that*?"

We draw closer to the window as the line thins, revealing a teenage boy behind the counter who looks to be around our age. His dark, wavy hair is squashed beneath a black Dairy Freeze cap. His smile, delivered to the family in front of us, is slanted to the side. A tiny spattering of acne dots half of his sharp jawline. His eyes are a particularly fetching kind of blue, and when they land on mine, my chest pangs with an electrical lurch. Attractive men are a rarity in Mason, so it's not like I'm used to this kind of thing. Most of the boys at Mason Central Secondary are off the table by merit of their compulsory heterosexuality, to say nothing of their bootcut jeans, military buzz cuts, and their widely held belief that guns are actually kind of interesting.

Seeing a fresh, attractive face in Mason is what I imagine it's like to see a rare species of gazelle out in the wild. You want nothing more than to stare at their dainty little legs and curly horns, but you don't want to spook them in the process.

"The guy in the window?" I ask.

"Obviously," Alan replies, voice lowered conspiratorially. "Are you getting, like . . . *vibes* from him?"

"Vibes?"

"Yes, Peter. Vibes."

"Gay energies? LGBTQ v-i-b-e-s?"

"Vibes of the homosexually inclined, Peter, yes. Or at least some chaotic bisexual energies."

"How can you even tell?"

"Vibes are not predicated by talking alone," Alan pontificates. "There's also outfit, jewelry, hair, and how they pronounce the word *quinoa*. Have I taught you nothing?"

"Leave the poor guy alone. He doesn't need a pair of creeps breathing down his neck."

"I'd do more than just breathe down it."

The family in front of us clears and the Soft-Serve Guy waves us over. Alan places our order with a laugh in his voice while I avoid eye contact, looking at the sun-bleached seating and the spill residue covered in flies. As Soft-Serve Guy makes our chocolate and vanilla swirl dips, Alan plays it cool by scrolling Poster through the cracked screen on his phone.

“Oh my sweet baby god, Peter. She commented.” Alan’s eyes grow wide as his free hand clamps around his mouth.

“She commented?”

“Tess Tosterone *commented!*” Alan squeals while nearby customers scowl at our audible flouncy-ness.

“Did you just say Tess Tosterone?” asks a voice from behind the counter. Soft-Serve Guy is back, holding two ice-cream cones dipped in chocolate. His adorable face has lit up brighter, his smile becoming somehow even more lopsided.

“Yes!” says Alan. “You like Tess Tosterone?”

We drop our coins on the counter and he looks at us like we’ve asked if the sky is blue. “She’s only the most talented queen to come out of *Dragathon*.”

“This is so, so wild!” Alan howls. “We love *Dragathon*. Not a lot of people around here watch it.”

Technically only *Alan* loves *Dragathon*, but right now I don’t mind being lumped into the equation.

“I’m actually from suburbia-land,” he says, shrugging. “I’m just visiting, so maybe I don’t count. I still don’t see much drag, but I did get to see a few shows at Pride this year before I came to work for my uncle. It’s so important to get out there and support local drag artists, right?”

“Okay, you’re going to love my page,” Alan swears. From a little slip at the back of his phone case, Alan produces a white business card embossed with Aggie’s trademark green wig. The two chat excitedly and I say nothing as a feeling of urgency settles over me. Alan has launched into a full song and dance while I can’t even muster a quick hello to the only boy in the

history of Mason County who can string together a complete sentence. For the first time in a very long time, silence feels like the wrong move entirely.

“I’m Lorne,” says Soft-Serve Guy.

“I’m Alan, and this is my BFF, Peter.”

I wave, knowing for certain that Lorne can only see my half-moon boob sweat.

Alan smiles widely at Lorne. “Well, let’s talk drag sometime soon!”

Lorne waves the card and smiles back. We’re halfway across the parking lot, our cones already melting, before it even occurs to me that my last chance to speak has come and gone. I know that I should just be glad I made it out without saying something humiliating, but for some reason I’m not.

“The vibes have been confirmed,” Alan decrees, his delight only throwing my self-loathing into starker contrast. He makes for the shady stretch of grass and trees next to the parking lot.

“What, because he likes drag?”

“No, because he *loves* drag.”

“Plenty of straight guys like drag, I bet. The bar for being a progressive straight dude has got to be *super* low, right?” I reason. “For all we know, he could just like the attention, like the time you deleted all your social media accounts for the weekend just to see if anyone would notice.”

“It’s called *Swift-ing*, Peter, and it is a perfectly acceptable means of gauging one’s social standing.”

“No,” I contend, shaking my head. “You’re doing what you always do.”

“*Excuse* me? I don’t *always* do anything. I’m an enigma, a mystery, like the Phantom of the Opera, or the guy who works at the dollar store who has a dancer’s body.”

“You always get your heart set on some guy who turns out to be, shockingly, heterosexual. Like the guy who works at the dollar store who has a dancer’s body.”

“Sorry if I prefer a tragic backstory. You know I’m an empath.”

I lick chocolate goo off my knuckles, girding myself for yet another

episode of *Why Can't He Just Like Me Back, Peter?* It's not a great show, but it's been on for, like, a million seasons.

"But this is a great day, Peter," Alan continues. "It's just like Tess Tosterone herself said when she commented on *my* Poster post."

"What did she comment, anyway?" I ask.

"She commented, and I quote, 'You love to see the magic of a pair of cowboy boots.' And isn't that, like, my entire brand?" Alan drops with a flourish beneath a tree and raises the cone to his lips before doing something rather unladylike with it.

"There is nothing magical about what you're doing with your mouth right now," I tell him.

"The magic of gay love!" Alan exclaims. "Soft-Serve Guy Lorne is going to follow my channel, and then he will fall in love with me."

I sit next to him and consider my options before I just let it go. I don't have the heart to point out that neither of us stands a chance with a guy like that, even if he is gay. Sometimes I wonder if Alan really does see the world as nothing but flapping bluebirds and a sun wearing sunglasses while waving a Pride flag. Do I tell him that pining after someone he's barely made eye contact with is going to end in heartbreak? Or do I let him play it out while keeping myself clear of the social carnage?

Alan regards me with a discerning eye. "And what about you?"

I blink. "What about me?"

"I have an open heart, Peter. Some could even say that I wear it on my sleeve. But I've known you forever and not once have I seen you take a stab at romance."

"See, that's your problem. Stabbing and romance do not mix."

"Oh, okay." He hunches his shoulders and folds his arms tight. "I'm Peter," he says in a grumpy-faced imitation of me. "I'd much rather make every single interaction a joke instead of knowing what it's like to feel true love." He's not wrong. I may be a constant companion to Alan's romantic misfires, but never once have I tried for romance of my own. I risk a glance

back at the window, where the Soft-Serve Guy is leaning out and making small talk with a pair of camo-clad locals. Maybe Alan isn't totally off the mark. Closed off and guarded is *my* entire brand. But Soft-Serve Guy is handsome. I am not. Asking him on a date would do nothing but land me knee-deep in the kind of humiliation I've only received secondhand so far. It would also be a direct violation of my cardinal rule: I will avoid being notable, significant, or otherwise remarkable in any way. Being gay in Mason County is enough of a spotlight, which is why I do my best to keep my head down and avoid the mockery that is built into the gay-teen-in-a-small-town experience. From the casual use of the f-word (not the fun f-word) on the part of my classmates, cold french fries being thrown at my head, and even one instance of that classic locker graffiti thing you see in movies, the students at my high school have a way of reminding you that you are gay and, therefore, a joke. I try to coast through without being the center of attention and avoid the many perils that come along with it.

This does raise the question: *Why would you be friends with the walking Pride parade that is your best friend Alan Goode?* Alan is a black hole when it comes to attention. Alan has always had a compulsive need to be the center of attention. It's impossible to stand out if you're standing next to him. So, in a lot of ways, I'm simply hiding behind the big gay quantum anomaly that is Alan Goode.

"This is one of my favorite local spots," says a voice from behind us. "It also happens to be owned by my father, so I may be a little biased."

Chrissy and Brison are on the grass now, mugging into a video, as I stand to leave and wipe chocolate droppings off the pocket of my shorts. That's when Chrissy catches sight of us.

"Oh," she says with a yawn. "I guess I'll just do that one again. I'm not filming my fashion nightmares video until next week."

“You’re a vlogger now, Chrissy?” I call. “Don’t you have to have a personality to do that kind of thing?”

Chrissy turns and appraises us sourly. Alan slaps my knee.

“Hi, Chrissy!” he waves. “Your outfit looks super cute today.”

Brison and I pretend not to notice each other. Tuning him out is something I got pretty good at this year, after what Alan has dubbed his Cumulative Pride Flag era. Each day, to my pronounced chagrin, Alan dressed entirely in a different color of the Pride rainbow. To his credit, it must be said that Alan contemplated the general mockery of the issue for an entire half-second before declaring: *We are agents of change, are we not? Being an agent of change means painting a target on your back sometimes and hoping that what lands is social advancement.*

Alan always speaks as if he’s just stepped delicately behind a podium.

The widespread looks of bewilderment we received in the hallways were nothing I couldn’t handle. When Alan Goode claims you as his best friend on the third day of ninth grade, these looks are something you acclimatize to. It wasn’t the booing, or the deeply stinging groans, that only heterosexual teen boys seem to be able to deliver. No, it was none of that. What really sucked was the commentary from Brison freaking Dallas.

“It’s so brave of you to shop at the Salvation Army, Alan,” Brison had declared on the first day. “I can’t do it, you know. I just hate smelling like the bathroom floor of a Walmart.”

“I had no idea Big Bird had a gay cousin,” Brison had said on the second day.

The taunts continued, evolving as Alan’s outfits did.

“You’re supposed to be *on* a Pride float, Alan. Not the float itself.”

“Are they letting blimps into the Pride parade this year?”

Each day would find me winding up to lob something back, and each day found Alan pulling me along with a shush. He would laugh nervously, desperate for the Mason Central student body to think that he was in on the joke.

“Any press is good press, Peter,” Alan told me on the fourth day. He adjusted the only green top that he could find, a *Kiss Me, I’m Irish* T-shirt.

“Am I missing something?” I asked sharply as I dropped a history textbook into my locker. I knocked mud off my shoes, now being tracked in by the kids who drive four-wheelers and dirt bikes to school. “Since when do you let people talk to you like that?”

“He’s going through a lot right now,” Alan reminded me. “Have some compassion.”

The sudden passing of Brison’s father had kept the school rumor mill running for months by that point. Suicide was the commonly accepted cause of death, though the facts remained publicly unconfirmed.

“Poor little rich boy. If this is how he grieves, I have notes. Don’t they have staff for him to take this out on?”

“He’s just having a laugh.” Alan shrugged, the plaster of his smile cracking for a moment. “We joke about each other’s fashion choices—it’s our thing.”

“I didn’t hear *you* making any jokes.”

“Well, it *will* be our thing.”

I slammed my locker. “Oh my god, Alan. You can’t be serious.”

“What?” Alan asked absently, avoiding eye contact.

“You actually want to be friends with them?”

“Chrissy has a huge following on Poster, Peter,” Alan protested. “Aggie Culture needs a bump, all right? A video collab, maybe even a monthly guest spot!”

And so I remained silent as Alan laughed along in a vain attempt to pretend that The Brison Squad was laughing with him and not at him. My ability to hold on to my carefully cultivated invisibility had begun to crumble. Every insult that Alan welcomed with the open arms of his monochromatic eyesores only made it worse. Now, on the lawn beside the Dairy Freeze, my need to become entirely see-through is breaking at the seams. I hate Brison Dallas. I hate Chrissy. I hate the fact that neither of them needs to have an

after-school job but that they both always seem so tired. I hate how clear Brison's skin is. And I hate that both of them never get tired of using Alan as their rainbow-hued punching bag.

"It's nice to see you, Chrissy!" Alan tries. "We really should get together some time."

Brison, looking carelessly strapping in his silvery athleisure gear, raises a derisive eyebrow.

Alan smiles. "Well, guys, we should head out. See you!"

Alan pulls me to my feet while they titter behind us. My face flushes red and I feel my heart rate tapping double time as a cold rage clouds my vision. They have everything. Looks, money, giant houses. And now they're adding Alan's dignity to the list.

"Don't leave on our account," Brison calls out. "It looks like you two were having a really nice date."

The words, when they finally arrive, bubble up from some deep pit at the bottom of my stomach. A dark wellspring of hate that cracks open when I'm not looking. Most of the time I'm able to keep a handle on it. This is not one of those times. I've turned and planted my feet, staring into Brison's movie-poster baby blues. The words burn cleanly on the way out, clicking along perfectly like a long line of dominos falling in perfect formation. They feel really fucking good.

"I get that things suck for you since your dad blew his brains out, or whatever. But for the amount of good you're doing the world, Brison, you might as well do the same."

Alan gasps and so does Chrissy. I think I might even gasp at what has just left my lips. Brison, terrifyingly, retains his composure.

The babble of the Dairy Freeze, bustling in the August heat, fills the silence.

The self-satisfied grin slips from Brison's face, replaced with something scarier. Something that exudes a calm-before-the-storm energy. He's going to pounce on me. Brison Dallas is going to leap forward and punch my pimply face into a pulp with his fit, TV-ready fists.

But instead he just turns and walks away.

“We should go, Peter,” Alan says behind me.

Brisson strides back to the truck, but Chrissy remains in place, her phone held in front of her chest. She’s recorded the whole thing.

CHAPTER TWO

PARTY KILLER

“You know,” my father opines, “when I was your age we had to actually talk to our parents at dinner.” He rubs the graying stubble on his cheek the way he does when he’s about to preach from his mountaintop at the head of the table.

“When you were my age you were all dying of polio and eating mercury for breakfast.”

I’m scrolling my Poster profile. No mentions or messages are popping up in my mailbox. Maybe Chrissy hasn’t posted the video. Maybe she’s never going to. Maybe she dropped her phone while jumping into her giant pool of gold coins.

“Peter, the phone, away,” my father demands.

I slip it into my pocket, pursing my lips in annoyance. A dust mote drifts through the sunbeam lighting our table. A couple pulls a pair of children along in a rumbling red wagon on the street outside. KCNM’s *News at Six* is now the only sound over the scraping of knives and forks, and I’m

almost glad for the heartstring-puller story about some kid building a tree-house for a pig.

“Now how in the hell is that pig getting up there?” Dad wonders.

Brison Dallas could have caved my face in without breaking a sweat. In another version of today, maybe he even did. I know that he didn’t, but that other version of today is beginning to seem more real than the one I’m sitting in. I’d all but fled the scene with Alan, my mind occupied with finding new curse words to describe Brison’s particular brand of foulness. But with my mental thesaurus exhausted, a new feeling is invading. It’s hot and itchy and nowhere near pleasant. Maybe I had gone too far. Maybe I deserve to have Chrissy post that video. But this is Brison Dallas. Am I really feeling guilty about him? I must be in shock because clearly my thought process is busted.

“Did you and Alan have a nice time today?” Mom asks from across the table. My father observes the TV screen over his plate, and I refrain from glancing at my phone again. Should I delete all my social media accounts? Should I legally change my name? Does the witness protection program accept applications?

I shrug. “Yeah, it was fine.”

“Well,” she says, cutting another piece of cold chicken. She laughs a little, and rolls her eyes in the universal sign for *maybe I’m just a mom, so what do I know?* “I don’t know how Alan feels comfortable walking around in an outfit like that. But it *does* take all kinds, doesn’t it?”

I think I miss the buffer that my sister offered. If Jess was home, I’d be able to stew on my impending internet apocalypse in peace. She has always been good at taking the brunt of my parents’ attention. Jess’s high school career was filled with sports, high grades, and a string of polite boyfriends. Easily digestible options from the *prix-fixe* menu of life.

“What?” asks my father, his eyes finally leaving the same ad for The Shoe Barn that has been playing since the beginning of time. The jingle plays tinnily. “What’s Alan wearing now?”

“Nothing, Dad—”

“Nothing is a good way of putting it,” Mom answers brushing the newly cut mom-bangs from her face.

“It’s boiling out there, Mother,” I say lifelessly. “Your parents’ generation broke the environment, and you all seem fine with it, but just because the ice caps are melting doesn’t mean that we need to.”

“But Alan likes to, ya know, make a fashion statement,” says Dad.

“Oh my god, Dad—”

“And I think that’s fine!” he insists, smiling wanly with infuriating nonchalance. “What was he wearing, then?”

“Shorts. Shorts and a tank top. What is wrong with you people?”

“Well, I just think that a little modesty never hurt anyone,” Mom asserts. “People love to talk around here.”

“Not that you’d know anything about it,” I remind her.

“And I just think that sometimes it’s better to give them nothing to talk about in the first place.”

Dad is playing cool, but he’s still looking at me the way he does when this type of thing comes up, like he’s not sure who let me into the house in the first place.

“Trust me,” I tell them. “That was one of Alan’s more reserved ensembles.”

I’ve never mentioned Aggie Culture to my parents. They are terrified of being notable for anything but upstanding citizenry. They’re losing their minds over the notion of short-shorts, so it isn’t hard to imagine how they’d feel about Alan’s tiger-striped miniskirt.

It’s not like I’m a drag queen. But being adjacent to one would be enough for my father to fall silent for a month and my mother to laugh nervously until she burst into flames. It was easy to keep myself off the conversational lineup before Jess moved. Her latest volleyball game or math test could keep my parents occupied for an entire week, which allowed me to slip under the radar. This is exactly the kind of parental scrutiny I’ve worked hard (by which I mean done nothing) to avoid.

“Alan is a good kid,” my dad begins. “But he does like to be at the center of attention, doesn’t he.”

It's not a question.

"As much as anyone else, I guess." That's a lie.

Dad sighs and scrapes his plate. "Good for him, I guess. Kids like that wouldn't have lasted five minutes around here when I was young." He says this as if it's not dripping with the kind of condescension that his generation practically invented.

"Kids like *that*?" I ask.

Dad's face flattens to transmit a look of *I didn't mean it like that, Peter. Don't be difficult.*

I clear my father's plate along with mine and he looks around my shoulder to catch the last of the news. News correspondent Trey MacLachlan signs off in his canned cadence, and I wonder what my parents would be like if I was more like Brison. Then I drop the thought entirely, wondering what my parents would be like if I was more like Alan.

Alan debuted Ms. Aggie Culture in his basement, which is a shrine to the very notion of homosexuality. The cement floor is a patchwork of clashingly colored area rugs that give the casual viewer a plunging sense of vertigo. The walls are speckled in fairy lights, and the room is filled with shelves covered in tchotchkes, contradictory fabrics, and posters from every version of *A Star Is Born*. An orangey-brown couch from the turn of the century sits squarely in the middle of the musty room, serving as the audience seating for Alan's downstairs drag depot.

Aggie Culture went live last summer, right before eleventh grade. Alan had been hinting at something dramatic for nearly a month, insisting that he needed just a little more time. This wasn't anything new. In the summer after ninth grade, he'd spent nearly two months teasing what ended up being his experimental art film, *Alan, Alanny, Alanis*, in which he speaks to an off-screen character exclusively via the lyrics of Alanis Morissette.

It is not a good movie, but it is a *great* movie.

So this time around Tilly and I weren't sure what to expect.

Tilly is our friend from St. Beatrice Catholic Secondary, which is down the street from our school. She and Alan attended Mason Christian together in elementary school before Alan opted for a public school education and Tilly's grandmother insisted she continue her religious one. Alan introduced us in ninth grade, and the two haven't let me go since.

I love my gay sons and I don't care who knows it! Tilly often shouts, unprompted.

Alan disappeared after sitting us down on the couch for a screening of the Lady Gaga documentary, which he told us was important preshow viewing. By the time the credits rolled, Alan was still nowhere to be seen. Then the TV was muted by an unseen remote, and Gaga was replaced by Cher's "If I Could Turn Back Time." When the curtain (an old Star Wars bedsheet) at the back of the room finally opened, it wasn't Alan who emerged. It was Aggie Culture. Her green wig was piled high in a thematically potent beehive. Alan's boy-brows were gone, replaced with arching black ones that rose high on Aggie's forehead. Her eyes were painted impossibly large in deep shades of blue. Chest hair poked out atop a mustard yellow dress that had been paired with a set of neon green opera gloves. She was bright, she was as sparkly as the glitter contouring her cheekbones, and she was impossible to take your eyes off. Aggie Culture was a beautiful man and a handsome woman all at once.

Tilly screamed and collapsed in laughter as Aggie's dress billowed in the stale breeze of a box fan. Aggie took center stage in front of the television as I sat frozen, unsure what to do with myself at a regular drag show, let alone one for an audience of two. Tilly, on the other hand, was enraptured. Standing almost as tall as Alan (I look like their child whenever the three of us actually leave the basement), Tilly has frizzy brown hair and wears dramatic eye makeup that almost makes her look like a drag queen herself. She watched hungrily and pushed me over when I didn't match her level of squealed enthusiasm. Aggie worked the room, twirling her dress and

kicking her cowboy boots in a feminine display of country charm. I simply watched with a mounting tension. When you're friends with Alan, you get used to sitting through his performances. Like the time he workshopped a monologue from his latest piece of fan fiction: *Call Me By Your Name, But Don't Call Me Late to Dinner*.

Cher faded out and Tilly gave a rousing standing ovation while Alan introduced us to Ms. Culture. Tilly pulled her back beyond the Star Wars partition and the two sunk into hysterics as Alan taught her his newfound makeup routine. I watched from the couch and smiled thinly, knowing that I was going to be the dark spot on an otherwise transformative night for my best friend. Still, I couldn't rouse the same enthusiasm Tilly found so easily. There's something about such an overt display that has always made me turn to stone. It feels as if everyone involved could stop at any time and reveal that they'd been doing it sarcastically and then laugh at me for not catching on sooner. It's better to keep a distance and not commit one way or the other.

Later that night, another queen appeared. Tilly's face was angled with contour and blush, her eyes somehow even bigger than before. Her Amazonian frame was covered in a red gingham dress that fit her perfectly while she performed a rousing rendition of Dolly Parton's "Here You Come Again."

"Of course women can be drag queens," Alan informed me afterward. "The whole point is that you're performing a larger-than-life femininity, right? It's not like you're playing a woman. You're playing a big *celebration* of women! Besides," he continued, "drag is an art form all about gender expression. There are drag kings, drag burlesque, drag creatures—"

"I feel amazing," Tilly marvelled as she flopped onto the couch. "Obviously you're next, Pete."

"Oh, no," I said lowly, trying too hard to sound casual. "Not really my thing."

"It wasn't my thing either, until right now!"

"I'll be gentle," Alan promised.

"It's just not my thing," I repeated.

"What's wrong?" Tilly said in a baby voice. "Scared you're going to love it?"

“Scared you’re going to look so stunning you’ll never want to de-drag?”

“No,” I pushed back, probably a touch too forcefully. “It’s just not for me.”

An awkward silence cut their frivolity short. I knew they were just trying to bring me in on their fun, but for some reason I couldn’t let them. The worst part is that I knew I was being a party killer, but I couldn’t grasp at another option.

“Okay,” Alan said distantly. “We’re not going to, like, force you.”

As if on cue, Tilly brightened. She sprung forward on the couch and clutched both our hands.

“Can we please focus on what’s really important? My drag name, obviously. She’ll need to be Aggie’s sister.”

“Yes,” Alan confirmed, their sisterhood an inarguable fact. “Two corn-fed queens looking to take over the world.”

“Tilda Soil.”

“Kate Spade.”

Tilly screamed and grabbed us both by the shoulder. “Rita Rustique,” she whispered. Alan cackled, and I started to feel like a Peter-shaped rock.

“From The House of Rural Realness!” Alan cried, and the two dissolved into elated drag jabber.

“There have got to be other queens, or at least queen-curious people, in Mason,” Tilly mused. “We should get the word out. See who wants to join.”

I laughed but stopped when both queens regarded me with mild scorn. It seemed that the idea of forming a rural teen-queen super squad was no laughing matter.

“I mean, yeah. That’s a great idea.”

The House of Rural Realness, or THORR, was born then and there.

When I’m finally able to close the door to my bedroom, I drop to the floorboards and immediately open Poster. Tags of my own profile are the first thing I see.

@MissEMissY CW: suicide, self-harm, trauma, homophobia. Not sure who needs to see this, but it's time to call out @ptkns1358 for making light of @brisondallaz and his family's trauma. Seems like internalized homophobia to me.

The video is devoid of any external context and has been edited down entirely to my choice words for Brison earlier this afternoon. I stand there, my gut practically spilling from the bottom of my shirt, with my hip popped and my nasal voice blaring like a storm siren.

@KlarisssaBton this is so messed up. Is Brison okay?

@Corriner145 not shocked. he is so quiet but when he opens his mouth its always something super gross and twisted. that guy sucks

@andruestein um hey @ptkns1358 waiting on ur apology???

Alarm, and something like carsickness, tumbles through my system. Did I really think that Chrissy would miss the chance to rack up some likes on this one? The opportunity to gain a few followers by basking in the drama of it all?

I move from the carpet to my bed. It's an old single mattress that likes to creak below me in an altogether pointed way, as if it's calling me fat. My bedside table, which is really just a wooden crate, is currently calling me poor. And my secondhand desk, cluttered with last year's schoolwork and the books I've failed to read this summer, is calling me a mess.

But Chrissy is the mess. She's so desperate. She barely has two thoughts

to rub together. She has nothing to offer the world, so she has to insert herself into something stupid and petty and pointless. Speaking of stupid, petty, and pointless things, I can just picture Brison leaning over her shoulder while Chrissy edited the video. They probably pressed the post button in tandem, his index finger laid lovingly atop hers.

When I get really anxious, I stare at my poster for the American Film Institute's Top 100 Movies and list their directors. *Citizen Kane* was directed by Orson Welles. *Casablanca* was directed by Michael Curtiz. *The Godfather* was directed by Francis Ford Coppola.

I should tell Chrissy how stupid and petty she is. I should say *exactly that* right in the comments. I should make it clear what happened. What *actually* happened.

Some Like It Hot was directed by Billy Wilder. *Star Wars* was directed by George Lucas. *All About Eve* was directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz.

But wouldn't posting that about Chrissy be as good as an admission of guilt? And what would I say, exactly? That Brison's continual jabs at me and Alan are worse than the thing I'd said? That he'd deserved it?

My thumbs hover over the phone. *Doctor Zhivago* was directed by David Lean.