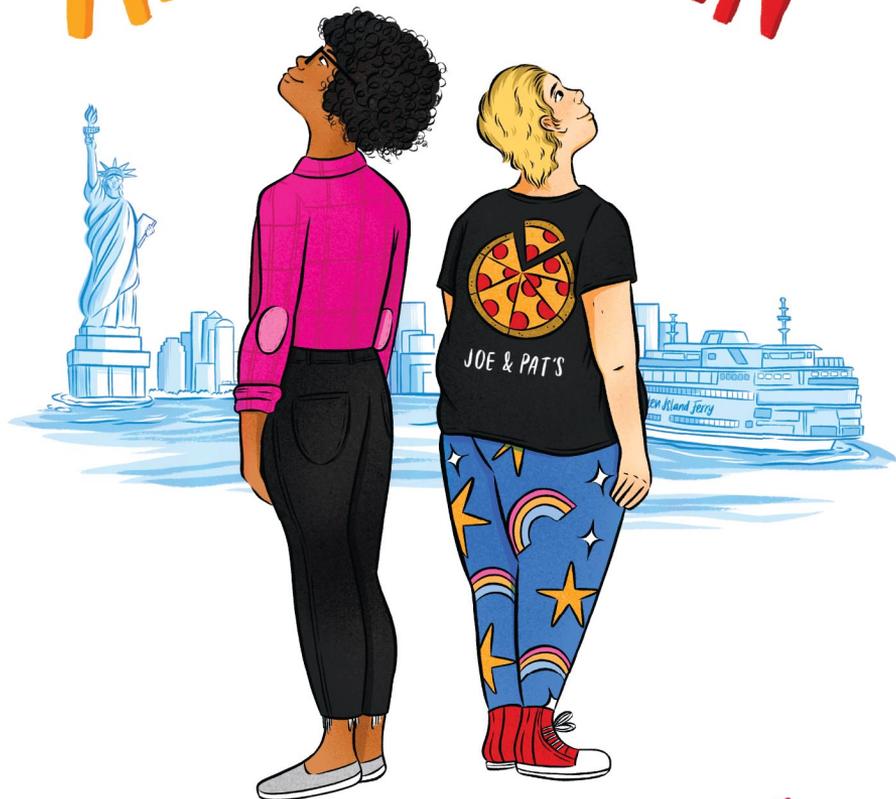


# ALICE AUSTEN



LIVED HERE

ALEX GINO

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF **GEORGE**

# ALICE AUSTEN



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**Melissa**

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AUSTEN  
LIVED  
HERE

ALEX GINO



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FOR THE RAINBOW OF PEOPLE  
WHO HAVE GOTTEN US HERE,  
FOR OUR VIBRANT QUEER AND  
TRANS COMMUNITIES NOW,  
AND FOR THE INEFFABLE FUTURE.  
LANGUAGE CHANGES; THE NEED  
TO BE OURSELVES DOESN'T.



# 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-onnnnnne, 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.

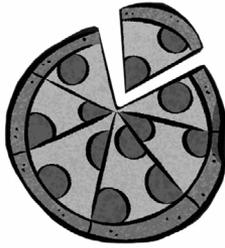
We raced down the stairs to Ms. Hansen's first-floor apartment. Ms. Hansen didn't have a view of the Statue of Liberty, since her windows were too close to the ground to see the water. All she could see was the back of the building behind us.

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.



## CHAPTER TWO

My life wasn't too bad, really. Seventh grade was awful, but Jess said that anyone who didn't think middle school was awful wasn't to be trusted. Jess was my other best friend. She lived one floor down, in apartment 4-E, with her partner, Val, and their baby, Evie. Jess was femme, Val was nonbinary, and they were both queer.

On Tuesdays after school, I "babysat" Evie. It wasn't *really* babysitting because Jess stayed there, and it wasn't like I got paid. But Jess appreciated the help, and I got to hang out with two of the coolest people I knew. Three, if you counted Val, who usually got home from work a few minutes before the end of my "shift."

Today was Val's birthday, so I was extra eager to get downstairs. Jess was waiting on me to entertain Evie so she could frost the cake.

"I'll be back a little late," I told Mom, who was on the couch, typing on the laptop propped across her legs.

"Oh?"

"I'm staying for cake!"

"Cake before dinner?"

"I'm living on the wild side?" I gave my best I-love-you-and-I-also-love-cake grin.

"Fine," said Mom. "Wish Val a happy birthday for me. How old are they now?"

"Twenty-five!"

"And Jess is?"

"Twenty-eight."

Mom pursed her lips for a moment before speaking. "Sam, how many kids do you think have friends more than twice their age?"

"Well, Evie is my friend too, and she's only six months old, so on average, they're more like seventeen," I replied. I'm good with numbers.

"Closer to eighteen." Mom was good with numbers too.

"I'm spending time with a newborn and her family. Most parents would be delighted to see their kid being so helpful."

Mom raised an eyebrow. "Fair point. Go ahead. I could use a little peace and quiet. I don't know how Jess bears with you *and* Evie."

“I love you!” I pulled on my fuzzy green slippers and ran down to the fourth floor.

Jess had left the apartment door unlocked for me, so I let myself in and dropped my slippers by the door. If the stairs hadn’t been so dirty, I would have just come down in socks, but Jess had threatened to make me wash the floors of their apartment if I did, so slippers it was.

Jess was on the couch, scrolling on her phone, jet-black hair framing her round peach-white face. Evie was in her lap, chewing on her baby fist.

“Hey, Sam!” Jess said when she saw me. “Want to take the sack?”

Jess and Val sometimes called Evie a *sack* as in a *sack of potatoes*. I had tried lifting a bag of potatoes and found it to be lighter than Evie, and way less wiggly. Evie was more like a pillowcase of worms, but that didn’t catch on as a nickname.

“Sure,” I said, picking up Evie and then sitting down on the floor with her. I put a finger into each of her fists and wiggle-danced along with her and the punk music in the background.

“I’m about ready to frost the cake. I just need to get changed first.” Jess was wearing a black T-shirt and pink leggings, but she liked to dress up when she baked. She came back wearing red lipstick and a full-length red gingham

apron over an electric-blue dress with a short flared skirt.

Jess had taught me that being femme wasn't the same as being a woman. In fact, plenty of femmes weren't women. It wasn't even the same as being feminine. Jess said that only you can name yourself as femme and that you get to make it yours. Lots of straight women dress and act the ways some people expect women to. Sometimes they enjoy it, but sometimes they do it to fit in at work or to get dates. But if you choose to do it because it makes you feel good, and you make it queer, like by wearing a fancy dress to bake a birthday cake for your nonbinary partner, it's femme.

I was amazed that Jess never got flour on her, not even on the apron. She barely even spilled any on the counter. She turned up the riot grrrls on the speakers around the room, who wanted to know *who invited you?* Then she plugged in her ruby-red stand mixer next to the powdered sugar, butter, and cream cheese ready to be whipped into tasty pillows of frosting.

This was the first cake Jess had made since Evie's birth almost six months ago. Before Evie, there hadn't been a week that Jess didn't have a cake or cookie or pie to share. In fact, the offer of baked goods had first brought me to Jess and Val's place six years ago. Mom and I had met them in the lobby, waiting for the elevator. They had moved in the week before, and they invited us over for slices of tres leches cake.

The next week it was an apple galette. The week after that? Snickerdoodles.

Pretty soon, it was just me heading downstairs, feasting on sweet treats and conversations about queer theory and riot grrrls and fat activism and a thousand other things Mom didn't know anything about. Mom was pretty cool . . . for a self-identified straight person. I was four when I first told her I wasn't a boy or a girl, and she read books and watched videos and even got my pronouns right almost every time. But it was Jess and I who talked about queer culture, not to mention being fat and fabulous.

Jess dumped butter into the mixer bowl, dropped the heavy arm, and locked the beater into place. With a click, she started the mixer at its slowest, growliest setting. She raised the speed until the warbling pitch of the motor rose to a steady hum, then tipped a cup of powdered sugar over the mixer, shaking in an even, powdery stream. I was amazed how little sugar puffed up. When I'd tried adding powdered sugar into a moving mixer, it was like creating a kitchen-sized snow globe.

"It's so good to be baking," Jess said, pulling the spice cake out of the fridge while the beaters cut air into the frosting mixture. "I finally have enough energy to do something other than keeping Evie fed and clean, and it feels good to be back in my element." She picked a large knife off a metal strip on the

wall, bent down to the level of the cake, and carefully sliced off the dome in the center so she'd have a flat surface to frost.

She brought a plate of trimmings out to share. I mashed a handful in my hand and popped it into my mouth. The spice cake was soft and smelled like warm, cinnamon heaven.

"I'm glad you're here to keep Evie occupied. I'm sure I could manage by myself, but it's been a while since I've frosted a cake, and I want to be able to concentrate."

"Well, you're still really good at the baking part!" I took another handful.

"I'm glad you think so. I had to keep rereading the recipe to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything. Okay, back to the frost!"

"Wait!" I cried, standing up.

"What?" Jess asked.

"This cake deserves a belly bump!"

Jess and I had given each other belly bumps since she first taught them to me when I was in fourth grade. I had been feeling bad about my body, and said that I wished that I was thin like TJ. She took me in front of a mirror and made me say three nice things about my body. She did it too. Stuff like *I really like my shoulders* and *Thank you, legs, for carrying me around*. And then we did our very first belly bump.

I had been shorter then, so she got down on her knees. Then we both raised our shirts so that an inch of our

stomachs showed, and we pressed them together, skin right on warm skin. “Belly power!” we had yelled.

And “belly power!” was what we cried before Jess went back to the kitchen to finish Val’s birthday cake.

She turned off the mixer, and soon she had piping bags that she used like pink, blue, purple, and green paint to create sugary flowers and leaves with deft turns and flicks of her wrist. When she was done, the cake looked like a garden in full bloom.

“Wow times a million!” I exclaimed.

Jess had taught me how to pipe flowers onto cupcakes, so I knew how hard it was. Or at least she’d tried to teach me. I’d ended up with three unpleasant roundish blobs and nine unpleasant oblong blobs, which was when I decided that I would rather eat dessert than decorate it.

“There are exactly twenty-five flowers,” Jess announced proudly.

“Cool! One for every year Val’s been alive.”

“You got it!” She put a glass cover over the cake and turned up the music. “The louder the jams, the easier the cleanup. Also, some company never hurt.”

After a smile and a wink, she picked up Evie and buckled her into her bouncer seat. I joined Jess in the kitchen to put away ingredients, wipe down surfaces, and tackle the heap of dishes in the sink. Then we rewarded ourselves with a punk dance party in the living room. Jess carried Evie on one hip

while twirling me around and around with her other hand. Every once in a while, Jess would switch directions so that I wouldn't get dizzy. I'm not sure it helped, because I ended up pretty wobbly anyway.

Evie was back in her bouncer seat, but Jess and I were still zombie dancing to "Pretend We're Dead" by L7 when Val came home. They kicked off their loafers, tossed their hat onto the back of the couch, and joined in. They were short and round, from their wavy black hair to their dimpled copper-brown cheeks to their sizable belly, and they wore khakis and a blue-and-black checkerboard vest over a light blue button-down shirt. With their hands above their head, they shook their hips with the joy of someone who loves their body. Then they slowly took off their vest, taking a step toward Jess with each button and slipping it off with a quick tug and a shake of their shoulders. They met Jess with a kiss that went on so long I had to look away.

When they were done, Jess said, "Hey there, Birthday Queer. I made you somethin'." She tossed her head in the direction of the kitchen.

"Cake?" they asked, eyebrows high.

Jess smiled and posed her hands below her chin to frame her face.

"Cake!" Val repeated with confidence. They ran to the kitchen. "CAKE!"

“Candles?” Jess offered, but Val shook their head.

“CAKE!” They pointed to their mouth as a hint to where they wanted the cake to be.

“Can we at least sing first?”

“CAKE!!!” Val took a knife, pointed the tip at the center flower, and brought the handle down and through the soft sponge.

“Wait wait wait,” said Jess. “It’s bad luck to pull out the knife of your own birthday cake.”

“Says who?” Val crinkled their face but let Jess take over.

“Nice to see you can say words other than *cake*.” Jess positioned the knife to cut out the first slice.

“Cake now! Cake!” Val pointed at their mouth with an even more exaggerated gesture.

“Really?” Jess’s eyebrows lifted in mock annoyance.

“Cake cake cake cake cake!!!” Val pulled a fork from the dish rack and banged it on the counter.

Jess’s pretend irritation looked ready to spill over to the real thing. Val stopped banging the fork.

“Puh-leeeeease?” They drew out the word, batting their eyelashes the whole time.

“I love you, you goofus.” Jess laughed as she spoke, and handed them the first slice of cake.

They placed a bite in their mouth and sank into a kitchen chair with euphoric ease. “Caaaaaaaake.” They took another

bite and made more noises of delight. After bite four, they refound words. “Oh, Jess, thank you. This is scrumptious.”

“Happy birthday!” said Jess. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“I hate to break the moment,” I said, “but, uh” —I pointed my finger at my mouth—“cake?”

Soon, all three of us had slices (Val was on their second) and even Evie got a taste of cream cheese frosting on her tongue. She banged her hands on her high chair tray with delight. She was right—it was fantastic.

“Should we sing now that you have cake?” I asked.

“Nah,” said Val. “I don’t need all that.”

“But twenty-five’s a big deal,” I pointed out. “You’re a quarter of a century old.”

“When I was your age, birthdays were everything. I didn’t just celebrate my half birthday—I used to celebrate every month. Nothing big, but I would make a sandwich, light a candle on top, sing to myself, and blow it out. I felt so old when I turned thirteen. And fourteen. Fifteen was terrible. Sixteen was okay, but seventeen couldn’t finish fast enough. I couldn’t wait to turn eighteen. That was a big one. And then it was over and I was on the other side of it and nothing had really changed. No halo on my head or nothin’. After that I was in college and hanging out with people of all sorts of ages, and, I don’t know, it just kind of mattered less. I had a

huge bash for my twenty-first birthday. But since? I've just been in my *early twenties*."

"Not anymore!" I pointed out.

"True. That's why Jess and I are going out with some friends for drinks this weekend. But other than that, it's just another day."

I almost asked if I could come along, but then I realized that drinks didn't mean soda, and I was glad I'd kept my mouth shut.

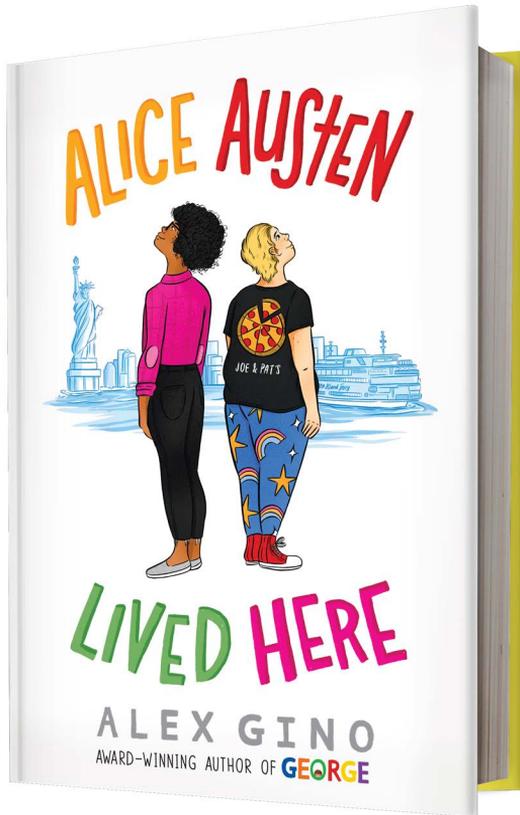
Jess cleared her throat with mock indignation. "Well, if it's just another day, maybe I shouldn't have bothered with a cake."

"That," said Val, hugging their plate close to their chest, "is NOT what I'm saying."

I was tempted to eat a second slice, but if I went upstairs too full for dinner, Mom would go on about how she should never have let me go downstairs for cake in the first place, and that was not worth a second slice, especially not when there would still be some left the next afternoon when I visited again.

I gave Evie a squeeze, put my dishes in the sink, and fuzzy slippers my way back upstairs.

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