



Confessions
of a
Teenage
Drag
King

MARKUS HARWOOD-JONES

Do you have to choose between love and the limelight?

By day, Lauri is a quiet, just-average high school student trying to stay as unnoticed as possible. By night, Lauri becomes Ren, a confident teenage drag king known for his crowd-pleasing performances at an all-ages drag show.

One night after a show Ren meets Clover and feels an instant connection, but then Clover shows up as the new kid at Lauri's school. While Ren continues to charm Clover, Lauri becomes more and more awkward in her presence.

It seems like it's just a matter of time before Lauri and Ren's two worlds collide. Will they learn to let Clover into their double life, or risk losing her for good?

MARKUS HARWOOD-JONES is an academic, a visual artist and the author of several short story collections and young adult novels including *We Three*, *Just Julian* and *Romeo for Real* in the Lorimer Real Love series. He is also co-producer of the film *Mosaic: A Documentary & Dialogue*. Markus currently holds a BA in Sociology, an MA in Gender Studies and is undertaking a Ph.D. at Queen's University. He lives in Toronto.



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For my grandparents.

01 *Blue Light*

THE STAGE IS MY HOME. I live in the glare of the lights, the beat of the music. I bask among sweaty binders, slipping breast forms, drying glue on cheeks and brows. I wink into existence as I run a hand across my flattened chest. Lifted by the screams of the crowd, I hit my next turn.

I walk offstage. Tara Dactyl tosses me a bottle of water from the DJ booth. I shake off beads of sweat as I snatch it and swig. I flash a grin back toward the

spotlight. Stormé Waters is already on stage. Riding the high I left in my wake, she starts hyping up the next act.

Earl Grey slips next to me. Their face is glowing from the phone that's practically glued to their nose.

I flick a couple droplets toward their pasted-on pointy ears. "Warmed 'em up for you."

Earl laughs and pats their wig in place before snapping a selfie. "Thanks Ren! I got some pics of you for Insta, mind returning the favour?"

"All right, gaybies!" Stormé calls from up front. "Give it up for our very own hot, hot Earl Grey!"

"That's my cue!" says Earl with one last nervous smile. Climbing on stage, they nearly slip on a wet patch by the stairs. I wince, then spin on my heel back toward the bar.

I flag down the bartender, Joni, for my regular — a screwdriver, virgin of course. The Barn keeps it dry on Sundays, at least before ten. You'd never guess it though. Guess a good drag show gets the crowd going, booze or no.

Pulling out my phone, I go to record Earl's latest take at the sexy *Star Trek* thing. I have to admit, they know how to work their weird, dorky style. First time I ever saw Earl on stage, it was like I'd slipped into a whole different world. Even now, after they've taught me their tricks, they've still got that special something. It's not until their set's almost done that I look down and realize I forgot to press record.

"Hey, pal," Joni says and slides over my drink. I go for my wallet but she holds up a manicured hand. "It's taken care of." Across the bar, a giggling trio watches me. I shoot my fans a wink as I take my first sip. Just another perk of being a king.

I'm about to go greet my admirers when I feel a buzzing at my wrist. My parents, again. Dismissing the call on my smartwatch, I wave at Joni. "Tell the others I said bye." She raises an eyebrow but gets caught up taking more orders. On stage, Stormé closes out the night.

My breath is fog in the cool air of Church Street. Blue lights burn from the neon signs of the strip.

Wiggling my fingers, I let the heat of the bar fade. I pass under clouds of vape smoke rising from people on stoops outside crowded pubs. A noisy couple grinds in an alley, while tourists try to take night-time selfies at the rainbow crosswalk.

Cold bites at my lungs. The transit app says I've got ten minutes until the next streetcar. I hunker down in the bus shelter, squeezing my pink fists. Maybe I should have brought gloves.

A silhouette moves into view. The streetlight's glow filters through her hair like a halo. The bus stop's buzzing ad splashes blue across her round, wire-frame glasses. Her cheeks shimmer golden-brown.

I stand up quickly, slip on a patch of ice, and smack my funny bone against the shelter's metal frame. Biting back the awful tingling in my elbow, I flash what I hope is a dashing smile. "You at the Barn tonight?"

Sharp eyes take me in from behind a pair of round glasses.

"No."

"Too bad." I shrug. "Was one hell of a show."

“Anyone good?” She asks, her voice softer than I expected.

“Me, obviously!” I start to laugh but the cold hits my throat and turns it into a cough. “I’m Ren,” I choke out.

A hint of a smile moves across the shadow of her face. “Clover.”

“Clover.” Her name warms my lips. “So where were you, then? I didn’t think there were any other all-ages spots around here on Sunday nights.”

“Who says I’m underage?” She looks out toward the empty streetcar tracks.

“My bad.” I shrug again. “Maybe you’ve just got a baby face . . . or a fake ID.”

Clover sighs mist into the night. “I just like to walk around sometimes.”

“Cool, cool, cool.” I loudly clear my throat. “So did you wanna, like, go grab a slice of pizza or . . .”

“Streetcar,” she nods.

I look up and see an open streetcar door. I didn’t even hear it pull up.

Cold slush edges in from the corners of my boots. I step in and tap my card. Clover stays put.

“You’re not coming?” I ask.

“I’ll catch the next one,” she says.

The doors shut with a loud clack. I watch Clover slide from view as the driver grumbles something about moving away from the door.

I surf the rattle of the streetcar all the way to the very back. It’s thankfully quiet. There are only a few other passengers, and all look too busy with their phones to notice one stray drag king. Sitting down, I spin my jacket and wear it like a blanket. I pinch loose the buttons of my shirt and slide my arms up my sleeves. I pull at the Velcro of my binding vest and tuck it into my coat pocket.

Next, I use a pre-packaged towelette to wipe the stubble off my cheeks. Then, a thin comb to coax my hair back down into floppy bangs that hide my face. Checking my reflection in the window, I peel off a stray fleck of spirit gum. Just in time. Above, flashing letters announce my stop.

I step off with a sigh, releasing the last of the person I was. I brush off any glitter still clinging to my jacket and pat myself down. In my pocket, I find my headphones. They flash red from the low battery. I walk home hearing only the soft crunch of my boots in the thin layer of snow.

The living room lights flick on as I come up the porch steps. Try as I might, the screen door creaks when I pull it open. In a second, there are two shadows waiting for me on the other side.

“We were so worried!” Mom coos. She pulls me into a hug before I can even get my keys out of the door. “Why didn’t you answer our calls?”

“Sorry,” I mumble, pulling back. I let my hair fall over my eyes. “Didn’t see them.”

“Why’d we spend all that money on that fancy what-cha-ma-thing, then?” Nathan asks, waving at my smartwatch with a forced scowl. He’s terrible at playing the scary stepdad.

“Youth group went late.” The familiar fib comes out warm and easy. “We went out for food after, so . . .”

Kicking aside my boots, I push past both of them and head upstairs.

“Wait one second, young lady,” says Nathan. I glance back, daring him to follow through. “. . . Does that mean you don’t need dinner?”

Mom pokes Nathan with her elbow. “Lauren?” she calls after me. I’ve got one hand already on the handle of my bedroom door. “Ready for tomorrow, kiddo?”

I grunt something that could be a yes and I disappear into my room. As I hop into bed, my wrist starts buzzing again. I’m suddenly flooded with notifications. Earl put up the pictures from tonight. There’s a bunch of action shots of me on stage, all tagged @The.Real.Ren. The blue light of my phone burns into my eyes as I examine each image, fighting off sleep for a just little while longer.