



A New Life

by
Alessa

A New Life

by Alessa

"Today's the day," I said, wiping the sleep from my eyes.

For the first time in two years, I was going to see her. We'd been chatting since we were eleven and had yet to actually meet, even though we only lived 30 minutes apart by train. Neither of our parents were very trusting of the internet, and even less friendly towards... people like us.

We first met in a chatroom. It was a pretty normal chatroom—just a handful of school kids, some in their teens. I only went there out of boredom one day, and so did she. I didn't think I'd ever go back when I first created my account. But then I met her.

Somehow, we just immediately clicked. We were both obsessed with anime. We both played Pokemon way more than we should have. We both... liked girls. It was such a relief to find someone else like me. After all those years of hearing how evil and ruinous we were to society, finding someone else who understood me changed my life.

Chloe's parents knew about her interests, unfortunately. They were upset and angry when one day they found "girls kissing" in her search history and became more restrictive with her online time from then on. But as they became stricter with her, she became more cunning, outwitting their inept attempts to monitor her on the internet. Ironically, I'm grateful to them. If they hadn't been so stringent, she might have never found her way into that chat room on the same night.

A month after we met, she made the first move.

"Hey, umm..." her PM read, "I think I might sort of, kind of, have a crush on you."

I remember the heart pounding in my chest. I remember the surprise and relief I felt. I had been too scared to say anything to her for so long. I knew I liked girls, and I knew I liked her, but it felt like one of my daydreams that never turned real, a dream too perfect to hope for anything else.

"OMG, I LOVE YOU TOO!" I responded in typical kid fashion before I could think of anything more subtle and mature. I can only imagine her face when I overlooked her declaration of "liking" and immediately fell into the confession of "love".

Shortly after that, we decided it was probably time to actually send pictures of what we looked like. It seems strange now that we hadn't even seen each other's faces before, but at the same time, it felt like we'd already seen each other's souls, and a picture was just a formality.

She was pretty. Like, really pretty. I was so nervous to send my picture back, but she spent just as much time gushing over me as I did over her. I'd say it was love at first sight, but we were already in love. It felt so strange hearing all of these compliments about every part of my face from another girl. It was

strange hearing them from anyone, actually. My parents always assured me I was a beautiful girl and would have boys all over me, which always prompted my dad to warn me to stay away from boys until I was much older. The joke's on him, I guess. Yet hearing "your eyes are so pretty" from Chloe was so different. It didn't feel like she was just saying something nice or trying to shape me into some "perfect" version of me. Every word she said felt so pure and heartfelt. She saw me for me and loved me for me.

After a year of our quiet, secret online dating, Chloe managed to secretly buy a webcam with money she'd been saving, and our first video chat happened when both of our parents were out. Hearing her sweet voice and seeing her beautiful face was so magical that I almost cried, and so did she. From then on, we would video chat together every day, always being careful not to get so engrossed in our conversations that we missed our parents' coming home. There were only a few close calls.

My mom once arrived home in the middle of a video chat. I often used headphones, but I realised at the time that letting Chloe's voice come over the speakers would make it feel more like she was in the room with me. That day, I had her voice turned up a little loud and didn't hear the car door close outside. My heart skipped a beat when I heard the front door close and mom yell out towards my room, demanding to know who was in there with me. Quickly closing the chat, I barely managed to convince her that it was only a video I was watching and talking along to. There was no way I could have let her start guessing that there was a girl I might be chatting with online.

A month ago, we were PM-ing back and forth when Chloe had an idea.

"Elsie, how much do train tickets cost?" she asked.

"I don't know; my parents usually drive," I said.

"I bet it wouldn't cost much to take a train here."

I hadn't even thought of that. I mean, I'm only thirteen. "Can I even ride a train alone?" I asked, expecting the worst.

"You should be. I know a boy at my school who went to visit his grandparents on a train over the break, and that's a lot farther away."

My mind lit up with all the new possibilities expanding out in front of me. Chloe wasn't even far away. We could visit each other all the time. At least until we were able to move out in a few years.

"Why didn't we think of this before?" I asked.

"I've actually thought about it for a while," she confessed. "I wanted to surprise you on your birthday, but my parents are very controlling of my pocket money. They demand I keep it where they can see it to make sure I don't waste it on things they don't approve of."

"That's so dumb! You're really good with your money!"

"Yeah, try telling my asshole dad that. He's convinced every teenage girl loves nothing more than burning through money."

I attempted to cheer her up, but I felt so awkward. I didn't know what to say because I'd heard plenty of stories about her controlling parents and how rigid they were. I felt awful for her mom too, because Chloe's father treated her badly as well, but her mother was honestly worse at times. Her mom had a habit of hitting Chloe. Thinking about that sobered me up. All I wanted to do was wrap my arms around her and keep her safe.

"So, assuming I can find a way to sneak away without upsetting my parents too much," I pondered, "how are you going to get away from your parents without them going nuclear on you?"

Chloe sent a winking smiley and said, "Don't worry about that, Elsie. I've got it covered. Just make sure you can make it here safely."

Not knowing the details made me a little uneasy, but the elation returned. I was finally going to see her. I was going to see my Chloe. I'd never felt so happy in my life.

We'd agreed to meet one Saturday. Chloe's parents were taking her little brother, Ethan, to his football game that day, and my parents were going to be busy setting up their church's fellowship hall for the after-church lunch planned the next day and then having a Bible study while they were there. It'd be easy for us to sneak out.

I woke up at 7 a.m. I had scarcely slept the night before from all the excitement and was really feeling it now, but all the emotion, the thrill of adventure, and love made it more than bearable. Seeing Chloe was worth any sacrifice I could make.

Abandoning the warmth of my bed, I brushed my teeth and took a shower. Despite my haste, I took great care to ensure that my hair was flawless. I even put on lip gloss and wore the pretty green dress I always loved. It came up a little too high above the knees for my parents' liking, so I rarely wore it, but this was the most special occasion I'd ever had. I checked myself in the mirror and smiled. I'd never seen myself look so pretty.

Making sure mom and dad were gone, I slipped outside and headed towards the train station. It wasn't a very long walk, but I was glad I chose to wear my sneakers instead of nicer shoes that would be a lot worse for walking.

I'd only been to the train station a few times. My parents refused to ride the train, even though it was usually faster and cheaper, which always annoyed me. They always lectured on how self-reliant people use cars. Well, who's self-reliant now?

The ticket was pretty cheap, and I started doing the math in my head to figure out how often I could afford to visit Chloe on my pocket money. The math faded quickly as I realised all the times I would get to see her, and hug her, and maybe even... No, kissing might be too soon. I didn't want to freak her out. How long were you supposed to wait for these things? We've been online dating for nearly two years, right? That's not too soon, is it? But we've never even held hands, and... I was so excited! Just looking into her incredible eyes would be my last wish.

My heart sped up as I boarded the train.

It was nice inside. Cleaner than the last time I remember riding a train. As it rolled down the tracks, I took pictures of the passing scenery to show Chloe. The world looked so pretty outside the window. Maybe one day I can take Chloe on the train with me. We'd be holding hands and making plans for the future. I know she'd love it. As I was fantasising about all the things Chloe might say if she were here with me, a voice came over the train's intercom to announce the next stop. I was finally here.

When I stepped on the platform, I looked around. I'd never been to this station before and wasn't quite sure where to go. Suddenly, I heard a scream. I turned around, and there she was.

"Chloe!" I shouted as loud as I could.

Chloe charged right up to me with her arms wide, glomping me with the force of her flying hug.

"Oh my God, you're so pretty, Elsie!" she cried out.

"So are you!" I said, blushing and nervous that someone would see us and figure out what we were doing.

Chloe was wearing a white and pink anime T-shirt, floral jeans shorts, and sparkling sneakers with glitter on them. It was the perfect style for her and definitely something her strict parents would never let her wear.

"How did your mom and dad ever let you get away with owning these clothes?" I asked, laughing and admiring every inch of her.

She leaned in close to my ear. "That's a secret," she whispered.

I blushed, feeling her warm breath melt against my ear.

"Seriously, though, I'll tell you later," she said. "Come on, Elsie! Let's get out of here!" She grabbed my hand and pulled me along after her, leading me out of the station and into the town she lived in.

"Where are we going?" I asked, thankful I went with sneakers instead of fancier shoes as I ran alongside her.

"To my secret spot, of course!"

Chloe had told me about her secret location several times. She went there when she needed to be alone. Not far from her house was a small park with a thicket of trees where she could hide. No one ever went there except for her, so she knew her parents would never find her if they went looking for her. She'd gotten in trouble before for missing. It never went anywhere because there was never any indication that she had done anything wrong, so eventually they calmed down and forgot about it. However, she still got grounded for disobeying their rules.

When we arrived at the park, I finally understood why she liked it so much. The place was nice and cosy. There was a small playground teeming with kids and parents, a few people playing catch with their dogs, and of course, a sizable thicket of trees that we were heading straight towards.

"So, what do you think?" she asked as we came to the small clearing in the middle of the grove.

She sat on a log where the sun shone through the green canopy of elm and poplar trees above us and patted the space to her left. I smiled shyly and moved to sit next to her, careful not to sit too close so she wouldn't think I was being clingy or moving too fast.

"It's great, isn't it?" she asked as she scooted a bit closer to me, closing the gap.

"It's so pretty here," I beamed, looking around before my eyes travelled to her beautiful face and... couldn't look away.

"It is, isn't it?" she smiled, looking back to meet my gaze.

A few moments passed as we peered deeply into each other's eyes. She looked so much like she belonged in this nature, among these trees and grass and sunshine. Her eyes were as green as the leaves above us, her hair as brown as the trunks of the trees. Every part of her appeared to be drawn from the purest beauty in nature, and every bit as full of life as this thicket. Her voice was lovelier than the birdsong surrounding us, her playful smile cuter than the squirrels chasing each other across the branches above.

"Whatcha thinking about, Elsie?" she asked, never breaking our eye contact.

I blushed. "You," I said shyly.

"That's funny," she giggled. "I was thinking about you too."

The colour of her lips reminded me of the soft pink of begonias. For a moment, I stared at them, moved an inch closer, then caught myself.

"The train ride was really cool," I digressed, trying to find any way to keep my composure before I turned into an endless puddle of love and admiration. "Want to see the pictures I took?"

"Sure," she said as I took out my phone.

I scooted closer to her, closing what remained of the gap I'd left between us. I could feel her pressed against me, the denim of her shorts revealing the bare skin of her slender legs. It took everything I had in me not to reach down and touch that skin.

We looked over the photos, with me describing how much fun the train ride was and how beautiful everything looked. But every time I looked at her, I realised nothing I'd seen could ever compare to her. Every time I spoke the word "pretty," it seemed like a lie because only she was worthy of that word.

"Hey Chloe," I said.

"Hmm?"

"Is it okay if I put my arm around you?"

She looked at me, those gorgeous green eyes never once breaking contact, that smile never once diminishing. I wondered why she was taking so long to answer, but couldn't bring myself to interrupt that moment of pure beauty and joy.

She leaned in close, and I felt the soft brush of her lips against my cheek. "Of course you can."

My arm wrapped gently around her body, and I leaned in to kiss her back, only to fall into a sudden embrace when her arms came around me.

I lost track of how long we sat like that. We held each other, snuggling close beneath the trees. We leaned into each other, our lips nuzzling, and took turns planting soft kisses on each other's cheeks. I ran my fingers through her hair, feeling the softness, while her fingers brushed down my arm. So many times I had dreamed of this moment and never wanted to wake up, but now I never wanted to sleep again. No dream could ever compare to this precious girl right here in front of me.

"So about these clothes," she said when I laid my head on her shoulder. "I kind of stole them."

I looked at her, surprised. "Chloe! You stole clothes?"

"Yeah... I knew my parents would never let me buy them. So I stole them and hid them away. Gotta learn how to get by somehow, Elsie."

"I guess," I said, not quite sure what to think.

"You're not mad at me for that, are you?" the concern clearly coloured her voice.

"No, of course not!" I exclaimed, desperate to reassure her. "I'm just surprised, is all."

"If it makes you feel any better, it was just from Walmart. This isn't even a drop in the bucket for them. They throw out tonnes of clothes anyway."

"Really?" I asked, surprised that perfectly good clothes would be thrown away instead of sold.

"Yeah. So I don't feel bad about it. And besides, this look really suits me, don't you think?"

I felt myself blush again and smiled. To say it suits her is an understatement of the century. "You're adorable, Chloe... you're everything I ever imagined."

"Hey, now that you've seen my secret spot, do you want to go somewhere else?"

I planted another kiss on her cheek. "If you want to. I'll be happy wherever we are, as long as I'm with you."

She laughed. It was so cute how her nose wrinkled up a little when she laughed. "Me too," she said, kissing me back. "But that's the best part about being together. Everywhere we go is better because we're with each other!"

She stood up off the log, brushed her pants off, and offered me her hand. I took it and stood up.

"Uh oh, looks like you took some log with you."

I shot her a confused look, then noticed she was staring at the back of my dress.

"Do you mind if I..." she trailed off as she moved her hand behind me in preparation.

I looked away, smiling shyly. "If it's you, I don't mind."

Chloe gently brushed the dirt and bits of rotting wood off of my dress, lightly touching my butt with each sweep of her fingers. It felt so sweet, so intimate, and so tender. I can't recall a time that anyone touched my butt apart from being spanked as a kid. Feeling something so kind and gentle in such an intimate place made my heart race with joy.

"All clean now," she declared in a soft voice while blinking those beautiful, emerald eyes at me. "Do I have any left on me?"

I looked down, nervous to be staring at someone's butt like that, even though she invited me to.

"Um... no, I—I don't think so," I stammered.

She laughed, "You're so honest, Elsie. It's really cute." She put her arm around my back and kissed my cheek again, letting her hand run down my back to just above my hip.

"Oh!" I gasped, finally realising what she was hinting at. I clumsily imitated her attempts to wipe my dress, barely brushing her butt, but without a clear purpose other than touching her, I wasn't sure what to do. She laughed again.

"Elsie," she said, "it's okay. You don't have to push yourself if you're not ready. I think I might be a little too excited to be finally with another girl."

We'd talked about touching each other in various ways in PMs before, but talking about it was different from actually doing it. As much as I wanted to touch her and know every inch of her in every way I could, I was still too scared to act on my desire.

"No, no," I said. "I'm just nervous. I've never been so close to anyone before. I've never touched anyone, you know, like that before."

"I haven't either," Chloe said with a smile. "But I get it. Whenever you're ready, Elsie," she lowered her voice to a whisper and pulled me close to her, "my butt is yours."

I giggled at that, and we started walking back out of the thicket, arms wrapped around each other.

As we approached the tree line, we reluctantly let our arms slip away, afraid of what people might think when they saw two girls coming out of the trees, holding hands. Chloe gave me one quick peck on the cheek just before we stepped back out into the clearing. I couldn't tell how much time had gone since we arrived, but there were fewer kids on the playground, and the dogs running around were different now. Glancing quickly up at the sun, I guessed it was midday.

"So where are we going?" I asked. "You know your way around here better than I do."

She smiled at me, the sunlight glinting off her brilliant skin. "I thought we could go to the lake," she said. "It's really pretty. I know you'll love it."

We talked while walking through the town in the direction of the lake. Every now and then, when no one was around, we'd link our fingers together, letting our affection show as much as we dared to risk in public. It was truly a perfect day. The sky was a soft blue, and the sun was just warm enough to keep us warm without overheating.

When we arrived at the lake, it was prettier than I had imagined. The surface shimmered and sparkled as the wind made tiny ripples in the water. Beyond the lake was a forest, and on its banks, a flock of ducks occasionally made their presence known with playful quacks. Apart from an older man with a fishing pole, the lake was completely empty of people.

"Well, we're lucky," Chloe said cheerfully. "Usually it's pretty crowded on the weekends. That's why I didn't go here first."

We walked down to the shore and sat on a bench a good ways down from the man fishing. After we sat down, a few ducks waddled up to us and started quacking at us.

"Sorry, little guys," Chloe said sweetly. "We don't have any food with us."

"We should bring some with us next time I come to visit," I said. "I'd love to feed the ducks."

Chloe nodded, then looked over and smiled at me before putting her arm around me.

I tensed up a bit. "Is this okay?" I asked. "What if that guy sees us?"

"It'll be okay," she reassured me. "I think he's too interested in the fish to care about what a couple of girls are doing over here with the ducks."

I glanced at the uninterested fisherman, then gave her another peck on the cheek and said, "I love you."

"I love you more," an impish smile playing on her lips.

We sat there, chatting like we would on our video calls, stealing an occasional peck on the cheek or a brief little caress. While we talked, I began to trace the edges of Chloe's shorts, feeling the silky skin of her legs. After a minute or two, she looked down at my hand, then gazed into my eyes.

"It tickles," she giggled.

I jumped a little and pulled my hand back. "I'm sorry."

"I don't mind," she reassured me. Taking my hand in hers, she placed it back on her slender leg, then brought her own hand to my leg and left a shy, little caress.

My heart sped up. I stared into her deep eyes. I glanced down at her lips and knew exactly what I wanted. I opened my mouth. I wanted to ask if I could kiss her lips, but she took her hand off my leg, and then her voice brought me back to reality.

"Elsie, I know this is a special moment, and it's legit the best moment in my entire life, but I need to tell you something." Chloe looked into the distance, and I stopped tracing my finger along the fringe of her shorts.

"What's wrong, Chloe?" I asked, worry creeping into my voice.

"I don't know how to say this, but..." she paused. "I'm going to run away, Elsie," she said in a serious tone.

I was taken aback. Chloe had never mentioned it before, apart from silly little illusions of fleeing to my apartment, which wouldn't be any better than her own.

"Wait, does this mean..." I was afraid to say what was on my mind. *Chloe was leaving me.*

"I can't live with my parents anymore. I can't live like that. I can't be their perfect straight daughter. I can't date guys like they want me to. I can't survive their constant breathing down my neck. I can't even have privacy in my room because they'll literally take the door off the hinges if I ever try to lock them out!"

I remember when that happened. She didn't come to the video chat for the whole week because of how closely they were watching her.

"But," I interrupted, "Are you..." I had to ask this, but it hurt so much to force the words out of my mouth. "Chloe... are you leaving me?"

Chloe blinked, staring at me. "No!" she exclaimed, but her voice was shaky. "I'll never, ever abandon you, Elsie. But I have to leave this place, and that might make things more difficult for us. At least for the time being. That's why I needed to see you so badly. I needed this one day with us together before I could leave. And now, more than ever, I know I have to."

I was so scared. "Where are you going to go? You're only thirteen, Chloe! How are you going to escape? What if your parents find you? How will I know you're okay?" The words came rushing out.

Chloe brushed my hair behind my ear with her finger and said, "It's going to be okay. I've got it figured out. But I would like you to help me, if you can."

I threw my arms around her and began to sob. "Of course I'll help you. You know I'd do anything for you."

"I know, and I'm grateful for it, Elsie." She wrapped her arms around me and squeezed me hard.

We held each other like that for several minutes. The idea that the fisherman or any passersby would see us was now the furthest thing from my mind. It seemed impossible to say goodbye to this beloved girl I'd become so attached to. I couldn't let her go, not yet. This was the best and worst day of my life. I felt as though I had gained everything, and then lost it all in an instant.

Chloe broke the embrace first and said, "I need you to help me pack my things."

I wiped the tears from my eyes and said, "Won't your parents know something's up?"

Chloe gave a dry chuckle. "My parents don't really give a shit about me. They always take my brother out after his games. They spoil him so much. When I was good in sports, they didn't care. They told me it wasn't very ladylike. They told me if I wanted to do something active, I should try dance instead. But Ethan? Ethan is the star football player. They practically throw a party every time he wins a game. So don't worry, my parents shouldn't be home."

We decided to leave the lake and head back to her house to pack up her things. As we walked, she filled me in on the details of her plan.

"I was kind of lurking on a forum about girls who like girls a few months ago," she explained. "I think I was actually chatting with you at the same time and was going to link you to the forum too, but then I got caught up looking through a post by this one couple. They run a rescue home for kids like us who need to escape dangerous homes. I'm not entirely sure if it's legal, to be honest. But hey, you know where I got these clothes, so I can't really complain about that."

She gave me a cute smile and laced her fingers through mine again before continuing.

"Long story short, I ended up reaching out to them, telling them my story, and they agreed to give me a place to live and take care of me until I'm old enough to go out on my own. Until *we're* old enough to go out on *our* own. I think it'll be nice to live with other lesbians."

That word hit me strangely. On a rational level, I understood that we were obviously lesbians ourselves, but I'd never been brave enough to describe myself as one. I knew what being a lesbian meant to my parents, my church, and so many of the people around me where I lived. That simple word scared me, but hearing Chloe say it, I realised I had to overcome my fear. I knew I had to embrace myself for who I was.

"That does sound nice," I said. "Living with other lesbians."

"Don't take that the wrong way," Chloe said defensively. "You know you're the only girl I really want to live with." She squeezed my hand a bit tighter.

"I didn't mean it that way. I just think it'd be nice to actually get to know what life is like for people like us. To hear their stories and figure out how to be happy," I hesitated, still working through my annoying discomfort of saying "lesbians."

"What do you need to learn?" she said in a playful tone. "You're already the perfect lesbian."

My heart leapt in my chest. Somehow, hearing Chloe say it felt so much more reassuring. All my life, that word had been uttered with disdain and disgust, but hearing the word come out of her mouth in that beautiful voice, it felt like a soft blanket wrapping itself around me, filling me with warmth and comfort.

We finally made it to her house. It was a modest two-story building with dark green siding and a red front door with a small, concrete porch out front. It felt surreal to be here. Chloe had emailed me a few pictures, but to finally be here, where she lived, despite all of the pain and misery inflicted on her in her own home—it felt like entering a sacred shrine. This was where my Chloe grew up; this is where she lived, where she met me for the first time, where she told me about her hopes and dreams. And now I was stepping inside, likely for the only time.

"So, this is my room." Chloe led me by the hand through her bedroom door, which was thankfully still on its hinges.

Even though I'd seen it countless times on our video calls, I gazed about with interest. There was her stuffed animal collection in one corner. The beanbag chair, which she was so proud of, was resting at

the foot of the bed. Her bed was made up, and the room was clean and tidy. Everything was flawless, just like her.

"Now, if only I could find my backpack," she twirled around the room, looking for her schoolbag.

"Is this it?" I reached for a teal backpack by her closet. It was heavy with school books.

"Thanks, Elsie!" A dewy peck landed on my blushing cheek. She dumped the books on the floor without a care and began stuffing her clothes into it.

"Don't forget your laptop."

"Right, that should go in before it gets too full." She moved some of the clothes aside to make room for it, then paused as if in thought.

I sat on the floor beside her and took her hand in mine. "Are you going to miss this room?"

She sighed and glanced at me with troubled eyes. "I don't think I could leave if my memories of this place had you in them. Unfortunately," she added, returning to the task of packing clothes into her schoolbag, "my memories of this place aren't worth keeping, so no. I'm not going to miss it."

Chloe examined the backpack and zipped it up. It was a miracle the zipper held at all.

"I wish I owned this place," she snuggled next to me. "I'm not sentimental or anything. I'm not going to miss it, Elsie. I cried too many tears in this place. I only wish I could be this close to you every day. I wish I could go to sleep like this, just holding your hand. I wish I could wake up like this every day."

The soft breath of Chloe's words melted on my neck. The house was quiet and peaceful, and in my mind, I tried to picture how all the stories she told me might have played out. The birthday parties she'd had as a kid; her brother stealing her favourite T-shirt and running away with it; the fights with her parents.

"One day, Chloe, we will have a home of our own." A feeling came over me when I said it, the same feeling I'd felt while we were by the lake. I rolled over and gazed into her eyes. She didn't say a word; she just stared lovingly back into my eyes. The way her hair cascaded out over her pillows was so beautiful. She lifted her left hand up, sweeping the hair back over my ear.

"I love you," she whispered.

Her inviting smile broke what remained of my composure, and I leaned in and pressed my lips against hers.

Chloe threw her arms around my back and drew me in so close that I was practically lying on her. I slipped my arms under her back, holding her closer to myself as we continued to kiss.

I'd never kissed someone before, and I was undoubtedly doing a terrible job of it, but that didn't seem to matter to Chloe, and before long, that notion quickly faded from my mind. My thoughts ceased to exist, and suddenly I existed in a singular moment. The world around us faded away, our bodies too, and all

that was left were two souls intertwined, inseparable, and eternal. It felt as though I experienced an entire lifetime in that simple kiss, and at that moment, not a single thing could tear our lips apart.

"Chloe! We're home!" A woman's voice rang out through the house, shattering the moment of pure, unimaginable bliss.

"You better be behaving," a man's voice followed.

Chloe's eyes shot open. "Shit!" She froze, terrified. "They shouldn't be home yet. What time is it?" Her eyes darted to the clock by her bed.

"Are you in trouble?" I grabbed her hand. She was shaking.

"How is it already this late? We've gotta go. Now!" she cried out in a panicked voice.

Only then did I realise the door to her room was open, and swiftly but quietly closed it. "How do we get out of here, Chloe?" I asked, seeing that our only exit was now blocked.

"I have an idea. Lock that door!"

I did as she asked and saw her tearing the sheets off her bed.

"Chloe, are you mad? What are you doing?" I asked, trying to make sense of our situation.

"You can climb, Elsie, right?" she asked, tying one end of the sheet to the corner of her bed.

I looked towards the window in disbelief. "You're not serious, Chloe? That's dangerous!"

"Trust me, Elsie, you don't wanna try your luck with my parents," she said, double-tying two sheets together.

How did I get into this mess? My heart was pounding in my chest, and my head was spinning. Are all first dates like this?

"Here, let's move the bed closer to the window so we have more room," I tried to help.

Together, we moved the bed, knocking a lamp off the nightstand in the process.

"Chloe!" Her dad's voice came back. What's that noise? What are you doing in there?"

I heard heavy footsteps ascending the stairs as Chloe struggled to get the window open.

"Is someone in there with you?"

The doorknob rattled.

"Chloe, you know you're not allowed to lock this door. Unlock it right now! You are in so much trouble, young lady."

Chloe put her backpack on, kicked the screen out of the window, and tossed the free end of the bed sheet rope through.

"Hurry up, Elsie," she urged me. "I'll hold the bed sheets while you climb down."

"But what about you?" I didn't want to leave her behind.

"I'll come after you. Catch me if I fall."

I hastily kissed her before climbing through the window. It wasn't that far to the ground, but holding onto a bed sheet hurriedly tied to the corner of a bed didn't reassure me at all. At the same moment I started my descent, I heard banging on the door as if someone was trying to break it down.

When I finally planted my feet on the ground, I looked up to see Chloe climbing out after me.

"Fuck you, dad!" she shouted as she began to slide down the makeshift rope.

From the window above, I heard a loud crash and an infuriating shriek. Her dad had to have smashed the door down. For possibly the first time in my life, I appreciated my parents. They may be terrible in a lot of ways; they may despise me for being a lesbian, but at least I've never had to worry about them breaking down my door in a fit of rage.

When Chloe's feet hit the ground, we took one last look up at the window and saw her dad's flaming red face, resembling that of an angry cartoon character. I would have laughed at how ridiculous he looked if I hadn't been convinced he was about to kill us.

"Let's go!" Chloe shouted, and we raced through the neighbours' back yards, climbing over fences, trying to lose him as quickly as we could.

"He doesn't know about my secret spot. Let's hide there for now."

We took the shortest route we could, cutting through yards and barely even looking for cars before dashing across the road. My legs were killing me, but the adrenaline kept them moving against their will.

When we finally scrambled into the thicket and made it to the clearing, I collapsed where I stood, and Chloe fell to her knees next to me, gasping for breath.

"Let's... never do that... again," I said between heaving gasps.

Chloe's frantic breathing gradually calmed, and she burst out laughing. "Hahaha... I've wanted to do that my whole life," she said, her unmistakable green eyes staring at me.

"What?" I said, trying to find enough air to speak. "Get chased out of your room by your psycho dad?"

"No," she shook her head. "I finally told him off. I finally let him hear what I actually think of him. Sorry you had to get caught up in all that."

I picked myself up off the ground and smiled at her. "Anything for my girl."

Chloe suddenly embraced me with more strength than I could have possibly mustered in my current state. "Thank you, Elsie," she said. "I couldn't have done any of this without you."

I hugged her close, so close that I could taste the milky scent of her skin.

"I mean it," Chloe whispered in my neck. "You give me the courage to move forward." I know that as long as I have you, I can do whatever I need to do. With you, Elsie, my life is actually worth living.

I'm not sure if it was her words or my body recovering from the fright, but my eyes misted, and the first tears fell from my eyes and down on her skin. I finally mustered the strength to hold her back nearly as tightly as she held me.

"Can't we just stay here in the trees forever?" I inquired, desperately wishing that our embrace would never have to end.

She looked at my wet face and gave me a quick kiss.

"I wish we could."

We stayed like that for several minutes, trying our hardest to make it last forever. Finally, Chloe relaxed her hold on me and said, "You know why I have to go now, Elsie."

Tears began spilling again down my cheeks. I knew it. I knew she had to flee to save her own life. I knew this was the end of us, for now. It was getting late, and she needed to catch the train before her parents figured out how to stop her.

"I know," I sobbed, letting my arms fall down but unable to pull away from her.

"Hey, you're finally touching my butt," she said with a teasing smile.

I realised my hands had fallen to her hips, just above the ground where she sat. I drew back instinctively, and she chuckled. I laughed too, brushing away tears from my eyes.

"Would you be so kind as to walk a girl to the train station?" she asked, batting her eyelashes at me. How could I say no to that?

We made our way cautiously towards the station where we first met earlier today. Regardless of what other people might think of us, I couldn't bring myself not to hold her hand. She didn't care either, because she was leaving anyway. It was so strange to me, coming all this way, having an amazing, wonderful, and terrifying adventure all in one day, and then never to see her again.

When we arrived at the station, Chloe let her hand drop, then pulled out an envelope from her backpack.

"I took all my pocket money earlier today before I met you," she explained. "It's not a lot of money, but it's literally everything I have. Since I'm not going back, my parents can't do anything about it now."

"Is it enough?" I asked.

She laughed. "It's more than enough for this trip." She paused and looked like she was thinking.

"You know what?" she said. "I think my girlfriend deserves a gift." She thrust forty dollars at me.

"You don't have to do this, Chloe. You need that money more than I do," I said, trying to hand the money back. "Spending time with you is the only gift I'll ever need."

She pushed my hand back. "I insist, Elsie. Buy yourself something nice to remember me by," she implored. "And tell me what it is once I'm back online, okay?"

A thought went through my head then, and I knew what I had to do.

We stepped up to the ticket counter, double-checking to make sure her parents hadn't shown up to see whether she was running away by train.

"One ticket, please," she said, handing over the money.

I pushed my heart back down my throat, slammed my money on the ticket counter, and said, "Make that two."

Chloe turned and blinked at me. "Wait, do you mean...?"

"I decided on a gift I wouldn't have to wait to tell you about," I smiled at her.

Chloe paused for a second, then wrapped her arms around me as tightly as she could, whispering in my ear, "How dare you? Right here where I can't kiss you!"

We returned our attention to the man behind the counter, looking puzzled by the two giggly kids in front of him.

"Two, please," we said together, and broke into laughter.

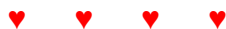
It wasn't long before the train arrived, and we boarded it together, hand in hand.

"So, how are we going to tell that couple they're getting a package deal?" I asked as we took our seats in a largely empty train car.

"I don't know. How *are* we going to tell them?" she asked playfully. "This was your idea, after all. I think *you* should explain it to them."

I laughed and cuddled up to her. "We'll figure something out," I mumbled into her shoulder. "No matter what happens, I want us to be together."

As the train rolled northward towards a great unknown, I gazed longingly into those beautiful emerald eyes, painted flawlessly by the light of a setting sun. Throwing caution to the wind, I pressed my lips to hers in the middle of the train car, determined never to let us part again for anyone.



Six years later, after that faithful day, and with a little help from our new moms, we were finally moving into our own apartment. The couple we'd stayed with until then were happy to help me as well when we arrived. They had been through their own similar experiences as teenagers and wanted to save other children from the hardships they had faced. There were a few others staying with them too, so there wasn't much privacy, but at least Chloe and I had our own room.

Things were a little disorganised to start with. Chloe had already said "goodbye" in her own way, but my parents learned about it from an anonymous email I sent from Chloe's laptop. I'm sure they were worried when they returned home and discovered I wasn't there, but I knew I would be happier without them criticising me for who I was. I checked my email account a few times and sent some heated replies to my parents, who were furious that I'd run away from home, and with a girlfriend no less, but I was finally free. I eventually deleted that email address and cut them off entirely. Someday, I might try to reach out to them again and see if they've changed, but for now, I'm better off without them in my life.

According to what I've heard, Chloe's parents, however, attempted to involve the police. I'm not sure how that was resolved, but our new moms assured us that everything was taken care of and that we would be protected from them. Thinking back to the day we climbed out of Chloe's window, I found it difficult to believe we were safe, but it became evident over time. We wouldn't hear from them ever again.

Our new moms were able to tutor us and ensure that we were prepared for college, work, or life, no matter what we decided to do with our future. I honestly learned more from them than I ever did in regular school. But the highlight was that I got to do it alongside the love of my life, right beside me, and that alone made it *way* better than any ordinary school.

They even let us stay with them once we turned eighteen to help us start working and going to college. In the end, Chloe decided to attend college while I worked so she could have more time to study. Chloe attempted to persuade me to go to college so I wouldn't be left out, but I concluded that being an artist was what I truly wanted to be. We finally agreed she should go to college on her own as long as I helped her with her studies at home, and it's been working out really well.

When we walked through the front door of our new apartment, mostly empty and devoid of furniture, I thought back over the past six years. I remembered the first time we met in a chat room when we were only eleven, a day I'll never forget. I remembered all the times we talked and video called and of course, the day we finally met in person. The memories came flooding back. The excitement, the fear, the worry, and above all, the love.

I grabbed Chloe's hand as she walked ahead of me and spun her around.

"Huh?" She looked back at me. "Is something wrong?"

I gazed once again into those eyes that I'd fallen so desperately in love with, at those lips that drove me insane, at her natural, undeniable beauty. I pulled her up against the wall beside us and pressed my lips against hers. At that flash of time, we were two souls again, intertwined, inseparable and eternal, living our lifetimes over and over again.

Please, never let this moment end.

The End

