

A Forced Removal from The Closet

I'm staring into the full-length mirror propped up against my room's east wall, tugging at the stubborn, stringy bangs hanging limply over my forehead. My hair is medium-brown with barely any body, so cutting bangs was probably one of my worst hair decisions yet, up there with the time I tried to dye my tips blonde and ended up with a greenish mess. I wanted to get a new haircut to freshen up the look, make more of an impression for the first day of school, I guess, but it just... didn't work. No matter how I make myself up, I'm still awkward Chloe, who moves like she doesn't know how to use her limbs properly and blurts useless things out with the worst timing possible. No matter what's going on, or who's around to impress, I'll always screw it up.

And this year, I really *will* have someone to impress- Amy. She's somewhat of an anomaly in our school for white Christian girls, since she's neither of those things. But even if she was, I don't think she'd entirely fit in. It's like she has this air about her, one of mystery, with an enticing scent inviting you to return for more. Boys have fallen for it, but she never seemed interested. Every girl's boyfriend has had a thing for Amy, so every girl hates Amy. Except me.

We've only talked a few times, but each of those talks was... great. I don't know how else to describe them. If this was an assignment, I'd get marked down for just saying "great". But this isn't an assignment, and sometimes, life doesn't give you time to find the right word.

I finish getting ready and clomp down the stairs in my heavy, ill-fitting brown loafers. There's at least a centimeter of extra space in front of my toes when I wear them, causing them to flap uncomfortably when I walk. The rest of my uniform isn't much better- shirt I'm wearing seems to be about two sizes too loose, and while my skirt fits mostly okay, it hangs in a way that can't be described as anything but unflattering. My socks are too loose for my feet and my tie is knotted messily around my too-long neck, making me look like a giraffe in leg warmers.

Riiiiing. Guess she's here now. I say a quick goodbye to my family and swing the door open, stepping out onto the porch and letting my eyes adjust to the light. Standing before me is my best friend of ten years and next-door neighbor, Kaity. She greets me with all the enthusiasm she can fit in her model-thin, 5'2" body. The high ponytail she wears gives her at least another two inches, though, so we look to be about the same height from far away. I've barely just stepped through the doorway when she jumps forward and flings her arms around me, squealing.

"Chloe! Oh my GOD, it's been SO long!"

You saw me outside my house yesterday. And waved. I don't bother to correct her, though, and simply extract myself from her grip the way I've trained myself to when she gets all huggy. I used to be pretty chill with her hugs, but ever since middle school started, I'd notice little things. The new shampoo she was using. How her eyelashes were fine and pale, like spun gold. How her body was so soft, so warm, and feeling it against mine made my head spin every time.

I'd tried to just ignore those feelings at first, imagine them being packed into little boxes and hidden away, like Lena had told Brainy in some season of *Supergirl*. The boxes didn't stay shut, though, and as soon as I managed to shove them into the back of my mind, they'd start to rattle and threaten to spill their contents out, painting the walls of my psyche the pinks and oranges of the lesbian pride flag. Which I obviously couldn't have happen, since if my school had it their way, I wouldn't even know what a lesbian flag was.

She doesn't push the hug once I manage to escape, linking her arm through mine and starting down the sidewalk. I've gotten to the point that I can do minor physical contact, like this, without completely freaking out- she'd never like me, and even if she did, I've got my eye on someone else now. But that doesn't matter- I don't even think she knows what a lesbian is.

"Jay asked for my number, but he hasn't even texted me. Boys are so dumb, am I right?"

There it is. My perfect chance. I could come out to her, right here, right now. Say something about how that's why I like girls. But I can't. I'm trying to choke something out, I think, but it feels like I'm not getting air, and my head is spinning, and my hands are clenching at the pleats of my skirt, wrinkling them up and making me look even worse than usual, and I just can't do it, I can't do it, there's no way I can ever, ever do it-

"Chloe? You don't look so good," Kaity comments, snapping me out of my spiraling thoughts. I'm still having a bit of trouble breathing, so I just shake my head furiously and mutter something along the lines of "nono!t'sokay". She shrugs and goes back to talking about... whatever she'd been talking about.

"So yeah, like I was saying, boys are so gross. I know I've gotta marry one at some point, but like, ew? Maybe I'll just go be a nun or something."

I force out a small laugh. "A nun...? Wouldn't you have to go live at a convent?"

"It can't be that bad," she tells me. I know that right now she may be complaining about boys, but at least she's actually attracted to them. She goes on about hating them, but I see how she gets whenever Jay comes to our lunch table.

We're approaching the school now, the telltale sound of students chattering slowly growing louder and louder. I can see our usual table, over by the corner of the quad, where two freshman girls seem to be waiting for us. Well, not us, actually- just Kaity. Nobody waits for me .

Anyways, the freshmen immediately run over to Kaity when she gets close, and I take that as an opportunity to slip out of the quad and into the B-wing hallway, near Amy's locker. Not two minutes go by before she's there. It takes another two

minutes of arranging textbooks for her to notice me, at which point she turns around, spinning on the heels of her high-top shoes. Her skin is a dark, warm brown, which complements the even darker brown of her eyes.

I'm not sure whether this is just because of the platforms, but she's got easily over four inches on me, and when she takes a step my way I can't help but shrink back a little. She's so damn beautiful, like some sort of social media influencer and I want to tell her, but I just can't. Even if she's into girls, there's no way she'd want to date someone as pathetic as me.

"Oh, Chloe! What's up?" She remembers my name. Amy leans back against her locker, an easygoing smile on her face. I find myself staring at her- nowhere in particular, just everywhere. Everything about her is beautiful. Her lips are full and shiny and probably so soft and warm, and she's so curvy and amazing and perfect and- okay. I need to calm down.

"Oh, I..." Think you look really pretty today? Can't stop staring at you every second of the day because you're so freaking beautiful and perfect in every way? "I like your... socks."

I can't see her socks. They're covered up by the high-tops.

Amy laughs, but there isn't a hint of malice present, even though I've just made a complete fool of myself. Her eyes twinkle playfully, and when they meet mine, she holds my gaze for what must be ten full seconds... ten whole seconds. The best ten seconds of my life.

"Thanks. Do you want to see them?"

She slides down into a sitting position and starts to untie the laces on one of her shoes, slipping it off. My breath catches in my throat- there's all the confirmation I've ever needed.

They're striped, but that's not the important part- the important parts are the colors. Orange, lighter orange, white, light pink, and then dark pink. The colors of the lesbian pride flag.

Wow, well, at least now the sexuality question is solved. But why did she tell me? She could've just thanked me. Or told me that I was an idiot. I mean, she clearly knew that I hadn't actually seen her socks, since she sat down and showed them to me. Maybe she was just really proud of her socks, but then she would've worn shoes that anyone could see them with, right?

A terrifying but exhilarating thought occurs to me- what if she did this on purpose? To... flirt with me. Meaning she... likes me. Oh my god. Oh my god. I think my brain's starting to short-circuit, because I can barely string together a coherent sentence in my head. Sh-she... she likes. Me. Lesbian? Yeah. Likes. I think. Brain not working. Make it stop. How? Um. I. Kiss her.

And so, without any other ideas, desperate to just do something to make it stop, I kiss her. And she kisses me back.

I don't even know how long, or how it feels, or anything. Your typical romance novel would talk about the softness of her lips, or the burning in my cheeks, or how I feel like my heart might jump out of my chest. But if I tried to describe it here, I don't think I'd be able to do it justice.

After some time, I pull away, afraid to look up at her face and see her reaction. Instead, I turn away from her, coming face-to-face with... Brittany. And she's holding her phone out, the light next to her camera on, a symbol of my imminent destruction. My phone is buzzing like hell. I step back, away from the camera and toward Amy. She steadies me before I can stumble and then walks towards Brittany, furious. I should stay to see what happens, but instead, I run.

I run as texts from Kaity pile up, lots of question marks and a link to an article on "how to stop the gay."

I run as my Instagram is flooded with notifications, all of them linking to a livestream.

I run as tears begin to trickle down my cheeks, quickly drenching my face in salty water.

What am I running from? From Kaity, and my parents, the freshmen, and my parents.

But mostly, I'm running from Amy. Afraid she might come after me, reach out, tell me that it's okay; I'm just being who I am. Afraid she'll re-enchanted me.

Afraid she'll give me hope.