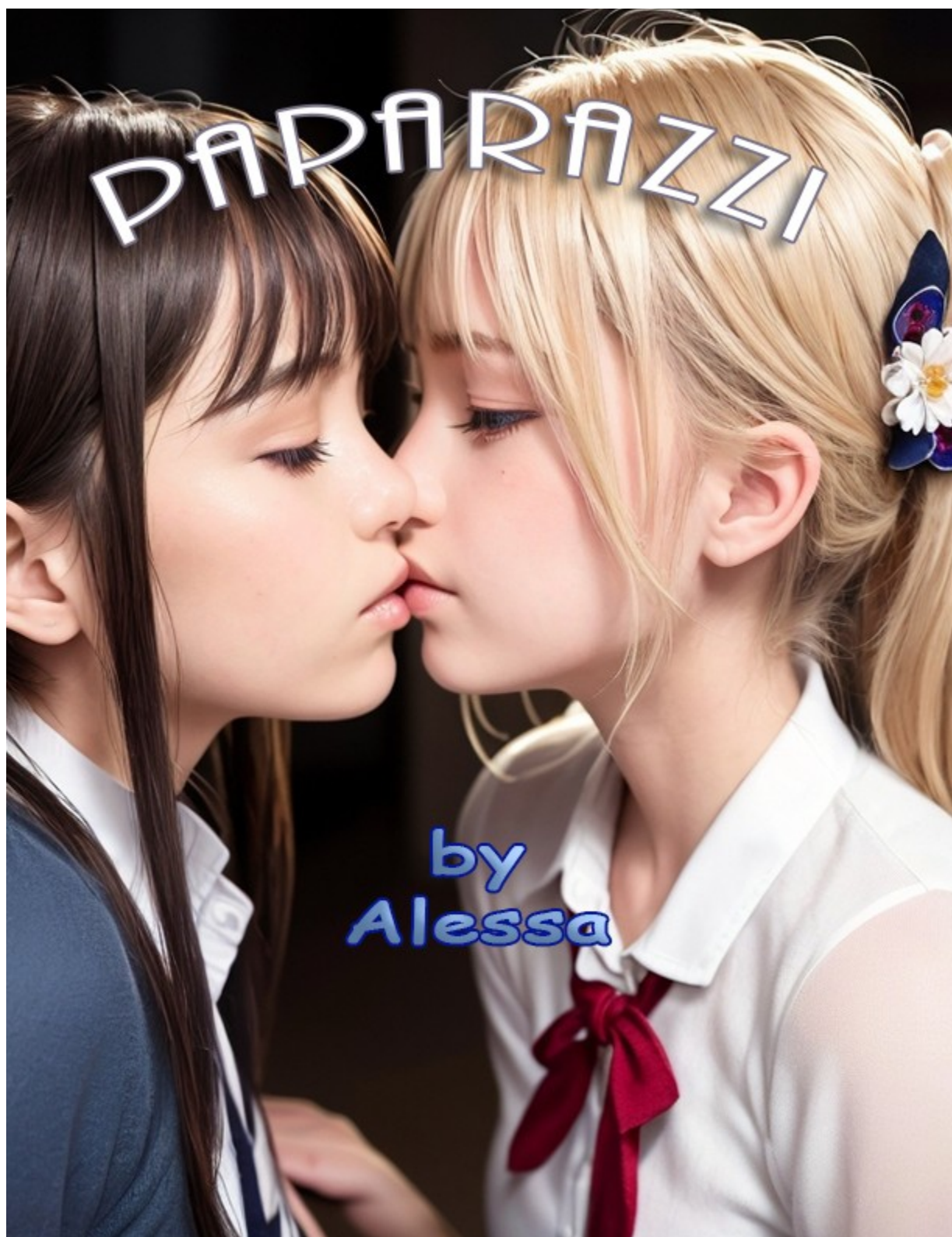




PAPARAZZI

by
Alessa

Paparazzi

by Alessa

It was late. Like 7:30pm-late.

Okay, when I think about it more clearly, that's not exactly late, but my Mom would be freaking out by now if I was anywhere else but home or school. This time, I happened to be in school.

I know, I know, it *is* late to be in school on a Thursday night when I technically didn't have to be, but this time I *did* have to be. Kinda... Sort of... You see, I was working on the next day's edition of the school's weekly news show, and it absolutely *had* to get done.

I joined this club because Mom wanted me to have more extracurricular activities. I didn't know that it would end up owning my soul.

At this time of night, all the sane kids had gone home. The only people left, hunched over the computer, violently rushing to edit clips of footage together, were myself and Minna. The club advisor, Mr. Ross, was around somewhere too, but he had an amazing talent for vanishing in a puff of smoke whenever we needed him for something.

Minna, however, was rather more reliable when it came to helping people. She was president of the video production club, so she understood as well as I did how absorbing, addictive, and soul-consuming the process was. As an eight-grader, she was a year older than me, and as vice president, I was her heir apparent.

Minna was a thin, bookish girl who wore her brown hair neatly combed into a long ponytail. She attended classes always dressed respectably in school uniform, with black-rimmed glasses faithfully adorning her ever-bashful face. She was also frighteningly intelligent and one of the sweetest people you could ever hope to meet. As I said, she was a little shy, and if you looked at her for long enough, you would realise how incredibly cute she was. Her shyness had caused her never to have a boyfriend, a fact that resulted in random outbreaks of depression and despair in the male population of the school.

Now, however, I am getting off-topic. The point is that it was 7:30 p.m. on a Thursday night, and we still had to finish editing the show. Not only that, but it was the Valentine's Day Edition because the holiday happened to be today. We weren't really sure why Mr. Ross had insisted on having a special edition of the show, but all the members of the club had learned that when Mr. Ross speaks, you obey. So we had gotten a bunch of footage of the pink and red decorations that were randomly scattered across the school, as well as several clips of some couples being moderately disgusting together in the halls.

We laughed over these clips. Minna and I had known each other all through junior high and high school, and if I had to be stuck in school for over twelve hours, Minna would be my first pick for company. We worked well together and had grown to be close friends over the years. If we saw

something funny in the background of a shot, we'd laugh out loud at the same time, while anyone else watching would not know what the hell was wrong with us. This tendency often led the editing process to take longer than it should have, as we replayed some random clip of some random football game where some stupid seagull flew into a pole at the edge of the frame.

"Oh! That's terrible! Poor bird," she would say. But there would be a smile on her lips, and when she saw my grin, she would break out in laughter and admit that it was funny.

I was glad. I was privileged. Minna opened up to me like she didn't with anyone else. I was happy to be the only one who really knew her, because she was a great person to know, as well as a better video editor than I was.

Soon enough, the ridiculous Valentine's Day clip was finished. We rewound it to watch it from the beginning and make sure everything worked flawlessly, only to burst in laughter once again at the clip of a couple kissing where a kid in the background was hit in the face with a soccer ball.

But thank God, the Valentine show was done. It was finished. It was great.

"Good job, Jamie. We did it, and without any help from Mr. Ross," she patted my shoulder in a congratulatory way, and I smiled.

"Thanks!" I grinned. I stretched my sore arms and leaned back in my chair as Minna closed the computer file. Mr. Ross would copy it on his flash key whenever he came back. Minna wore short sleeves, and her thin arms caught my eye. They moved swiftly as her fingers tapped at the keyboard and mouse, and I couldn't help but be mesmerised by them for a moment.

"I just don't get Valentine's Day, though," I continued, snapping myself out of it. No, actually, I was just talking to keep myself from falling asleep. It had been a long day. "I mean, if people like each other, they shouldn't wait until some fakey holiday to show it; it's just silly. Right?"

"Oh, I don't know," Minna said, almost finished with the computer now. "I think it's kind of sweet. It's a chance to be nice to people and be friendly for just one day. I'm all for the pink crêpe paper if that's what it takes."

"Spoken by the true Queen of Kindness, her Majesty, Minna Anderson," I announced, bowing to her. She blushed. She always got embarrassed when people made a big deal about her, even if she really *was* the queen of all things pleasant.

"Stop it!" Minna pouted, but with a smile. She made a few final clicks and taps on the machine. "Completely done. Finally!" she cried triumphantly, then turned to me, feigning seriousness. "Now about Valentine's Day. We have to reach an agreement on this before we leave." This was how we always settled the dumb little disagreements we invariably had every week. She thought for a moment. "Valentine's Day is a stupid *but* nice little holiday. Agreed?" She held out her hand.

"Agreed," I replied all too easily, taking her hand and shaking it. We smiled at each other. It was just fun being around her.

However, our eyes caught on each other's in the oddest way. Like magnets, we could have pulled them apart if we had wanted to, but we simply didn't. Slowly, very slowly, she leaned down towards me. Uncertainly, fearfully, our faces edged closer towards each other until finally her lips brushed gently against mine.

For a moment, I wasn't sure if it was really happening. I thought I might just have been thinking so hard about kissing her that I was starting to hallucinate. Quickly, though, her mouth pressed down on mine just a little bit harder, and I knew then it was real.

I was amazed. It was amazing. I felt so much need and so much desire flowing from me to her. Surprisingly, beautifully, I felt just as much need and want coming from her. The force of that simple, soft kiss nearly knocked me backward.

We sat utterly still for God only knows how long, speechless and content to revel in the stunning perfection of our very first kiss. When we finally stood away from the desk, we were smiling and glancing at each other shyly.

"So... so, do you still want me to walk with you home?"

I couldn't help but smile even more broadly; she was so sweet. "Yeah, I do."

"Let's go then," Minna said, standing up. We walked out of the school and across the now deserted park, where some sparrows gathered to play and splash in a shallow pond.

"That was... That was unexpected," I whispered under my breath. She blushed again. I didn't want to embarrass her; I just wanted to see her smile.

We were quiet as we walked home. Usually we talked, made jokes, listened to music. This time there was an awkward but happy silence, punctuated occasionally by shy sideways glances from one to another.

After a short walk, Minna stopped in front of my house and waited while I walked up my porch steps. Just as I was about to go inside, she called to me.

"Hey Jamie!" I turned around. She was smiling still, as sweetly as ever. "Happy Valentine's Day."



I went through the beginning of the next day in a giddy daze. But as giddy as I was, I couldn't stop pondering the complications brought on by my strangely irresistible desire to kiss Minna again and again. Everything happened so quickly. It was entirely unexpected, and I wasn't sure how to feel about it. At first, I even had trouble believing that it really had happened, but by God, it had.

I sat in first-period homeroom, waiting for Mr. Ross' voice to come over the PA. It did, right on time, as usual, and said the words that everyone in the school had memorised: "Good morning, everybody. It's time for this week's School News Video Edition. All teachers, please turn on your television sets."

I grew even more excited. Half of me was anticipating our Valentine's Day video clip, excited about how great it was going to be. The other half was basically hopping up and down for the sole reason that Minna had kissed me last night.

Minna had kissed me. Aah!

The show ran perfectly, and I could just hold back my laughter as that clip with the kid and the ball played again. I knew that Minna was doing the same.

The show ended just as Minna and I had put it together. But the credits did not roll. I was worried for a moment that there was some technical issue, but Mr. Ross' voice suddenly came forth from the TV set.

"The spirit of yesterday's holiday was everywhere, and the students behind the School News Video Edition didn't just bring you the story. That's right, love was in the air for some members of our Video Club's crew."

What?

A shot of a familiar room—the school studio? The image was very slightly blurred; it must have been taken through the window of the classroom door. But it was clear enough to show who was inside...

Oh, God. No.

It was us. Minna and me. The kids in the class were all puzzled. Some were leaning towards the screen, some were whispering to each other, but most were shooting looks at me out of the corners of their eyes. Even the teacher was looking at me funny.

I wanted to cover my eyes and make everyone in the room do the same. Hell, I wanted to bury my head in a hole so I wouldn't have to see this happen, but I couldn't tear my eyes away from the screen. It was like I was watching a horror movie, only it was my life, or what was left of it.

Six hundred children, plus faculty, plus janitors, plus the kitchen staff, the mailman, some transients, and an occasional parent on their visit to the school, watched the scene play out.

On the screen, Minna and I shook hands. I could read the word '*agreed*' on my own lips. Then the pause.

Maybe it'll stop. Maybe the tape will break. Maybe we'll lose power. Maybe a comet will hit the school and destroy the network router that was sending these images to nearly every person I'd ever met and hundreds more that I hadn't.

But, of course, nothing of the sort happened. No such luck for you, Jamie.

Minna leaned towards me. The muttering in the class grew louder and, more specifically, surprised. I seriously considered suicide as her face came closer to mine, and finally our lips touched.

The room erupted. I'm not even sure what they were saying, but everyone was shouting, looking at me, pointing at me, looking back at the screen, shouting some more...

The credits rolled. Over the frozen capture of our kiss. Mr. Ross' voice came over the PA once again, reciting familiar words. His voice wasn't in the tone I was used to, though; it sounded as if he'd just seen the funniest damn thing in the entire world, with an unbearably smug undertone to it.

"And that's all for the School News Video Edition. Enjoy your Friday and have a great weekend."

The bell rang, and the kids in the class stormed out, chattering, laughing, and looking at me in a very pointed manner. I stayed behind for a moment, and when everyone else had left, I shouted a socially unacceptable word very, very loudly.

"Jamie!" the teacher barked. She looked at me for a moment, then relented, saying, "Just go to your next class, okay? You might be late as it is."

I dashed out of the room and down the hall. Suddenly, I collided with a person coming around a corner. Minna.

We looked at each other blankly for a moment. From somewhere, a catcall sounded.

I finally remembered how to speak. "Minna, the only person who could have filmed that and then put it in the show after we finished it is Mr. Ross himself. He was the only one there last night when..."

"I know," she said. She sounded as hurried and flustered as I did. "We'll talk to him during lunch, okay? Don't do anything about it without me."

Smart girl, Minna, smart girl. Underneath her words was another meaning: 'Don't do anything *stupid*, Jamie.' I had been in two fights in the past three years. It was just how I am—once I get mad enough, *somebody* is getting hurt. I never meant to; I just boiled over. She knew as well as I did that if I went anywhere near Mr. Ross without someone with me to stop me, I would end up not only doing something stupid, but doing something *monumentally* stupid.

"Okay, fine. Lunch. Yes. Bye. See you then." We stood frozen for a moment, then the last bell rang. We both jumped, and I cursed again. Minna shot me a look and I was struck once again, just for a moment, how sweet and kind she was. How easy it was to see that it hurt her soul when people used foul words around her.

Her face softened again, and she spoke quickly. "Meet me in front of the cafeteria for fifth period. We'll get this sorted out, I promise." I nodded in assent, and we bolted in opposite directions.

The next class period moved like molasses. Molasses filled with funny looks, wolf whistles, jabbing comments, and all sorts of horrid things not often associated with molasses. The cruelty of children. Not just that, but some girls even seemed jealous of me. I know, right? Who would have thought there were so many potential lesbians in our school? Other kids, and even some teachers, seemed mad at me. Christ. They were looking at me like I had stolen Minna's virginity and deflowered their paragon of virtue. I could only imagine how Minna felt, and that only made me feel even worse.

I also received several pats on the back, both proverbial and literal, and one girl even asked me what it felt like. The praise was worse than the torment. Couldn't they understand that they were ruining it?

One person was different, though. My English teacher, my favourite teacher, Miss Willems. She was a kind woman in her late fifties whom one couldn't help but love. When I sat down in her class in third period, she gave me a very specific look, as had all my teachers. However, hers was not a chiding or accusatory look. It was the look you might expect from your Mom if she had happened to witness your first kiss and thought it was very cute. Ms. Willems clearly thought that it was sweet. Maybe she was even happy for me. After class, she pulled me aside.

"Jamie," she said. "That was a rotten trick that got played on you. Just don't let it get to you, okay? Don't let what other people think of it change what *you* think." She patted my head in a grandmotherly way, and I smiled for the first time in hours. She sent me along to my next class, but not before making me promise that I wouldn't let all the craziness mess with what was actually important.

I walked out of her classroom in a daze, thinking for the first time since the video clip had aired that perhaps I hadn't done something terribly wrong. No, I had done nothing wrong. Minna had kissed me, and I had kissed her back. Everyone in the school was freaking out over our kiss, but frankly, two high school kids kissing was no big deal, even if we were both girls. Well, okay, it was a big deal. To me. But why was everyone else getting annoyed or upset about it without good reason? People are allowed to do so as they like, and things happen when there's nobody around to see them. In fact, if anyone should be upset, it was Minna and I, because we were the ones who had been betrayed. By a teacher, no less.

Bearing all this in mind, I made it through fourth period easily, just letting everything that people said, all the looks they sent my way, all the jeers and finger pointing, roll off of me. They were mistaken. I had done nothing wrong.

Finally, the fifth period came. Minna was waiting for me when I got to the cafeteria.

"Are you ready?" she asked. She looked upset. I could just imagine what her morning had been like. Something burned in me, something like a desire to murder someone. How dare anybody do something so awful to someone so wonderful and kind? I had done some dumb, mean things in my life. I had humiliated my enemies whenever possible. But Minna had done nothing wrong. She deserved all of this even less than I did.

"Ready," I replied, and we marched towards Mr. Ross' room together.

I was vindicated; I was right; I was innocent—we were both innocent of any wrong.

And I was mad as hell.



Up the stairs to the second floor, around the corner, the third door on the left. This was our destination. This was the location at which I was fully prepared to commit my first murder.

It was Minna who knocked on the door. I stayed behind her, partially because I didn't know what to do, and partially because if there wasn't a human barrier stopping me, there was a distinct possibility that I would just punch whoever came out of the room.

Which turned out to be Mr. Ross after all, so by my calculations it would have been just fine to knock him out, but I didn't think that Minna, or the more disciplinarian school administrators, would approve of my idea of justice.

"Mr. Ross, can we talk to you for a second?" Minna asked, with an amazingly convincing, manufactured calm in her voice. I was duly impressed.

"Sure thing," Satan replied. He didn't have a class to teach that period. He closed the door behind him and stepped out into the hall. "What can I do for you two?"

Ooh, that bastard. Acting like nothing had happened. Like he hadn't totally invaded our privacy for the sake of his own amusement. I kept my mouth shut.

"Mr. Ross," Minna began. "We know that you're the only one who could have filmed us... and then put it in the video. You were the only one there late last night, besides us."

The King of All Assholes smiled. "I knew you two were smart. I thought you'd find me out, but I thought you wouldn't mind."

"We wouldn't *mind*? Is that all you thought?!" I barked. There's only so long I can internalise blind rage.

"Jamie," Minna said in a calming tone. I nodded. She went on speaking. "Mr. Ross, how could you've done that?"

The man with the moral fibre of a dead rat just smiled again and spread his hands. "I wanted to. You were so cute together!"

"You *wanted to*?!" I practically screamed.

"We were *cute*?!" Minna joined in my disbelief.

The devil disguised as a science teacher gave us a superior look and went on. "I am, after all, in charge of the final cut of the video. I had a camera with me when I went out of the studio, and I saw your little display of affection as I passed by and decided to film it. I don't see how you can really blame me; anybody walking by the studio could have seen you. Besides, you used footage of other couples kissing. How is it any different?"

"We are girls!! It's... It's different. And besides, not everyone passing by would have announced our private business to the whole school!" I shouted. Ha! Finally! A coherent thought.

"And we *asked* all those kids if we could use their footage. We didn't secretly film them and then broadcast it without them knowing," Minna added.

"Quite frankly," said the man, who was obviously struggling for a plausible excuse, "I don't see anything that can be done. The show has already aired. Everyone here has already seen it. Plus, I was in the main office when the show aired. The principal thought it was... what were his words... Oh yes, 'absolutely adorable'. You were absolutely adorable. He didn't mind at all."

"That may be so, but does he know how you came by that footage?" Minna asked, and I could see a chink form in the incredible bastard's armour. He blinked, but then regained his composure and went on.

"No, of course not. Why would he ask? He trusts me. What goes in the show is up to me; he doesn't get any say in the process anyway. And even if you went and told him, I'm a teacher. I think he would put my word before that of a couple of students. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have work to do," he said, turning to open the door.

"You...! You *jerk*!" I screamed.

"Jamie!" Minna shouted, half chiding my language, half surprised, as she was forced to dive forward and grab me around the waist to stop me from swinging my fist into Mr. Ross's face.

"Minna, just let me go, please. He's wrong, you know he is!" I growled. I made a leap forward again just before the door slammed. But Minna's light frame was surprisingly strong, and she yanked me back again. As I struggled in her arms, she spoke into my ear in a tone I had never heard before. Part angry, part frustrated, part protective, part on the verge of tears, part an older sister looking out for me like she always has.

"Jamie, you have to stop. I know you want to get back at him, but you can't. It would only make things worse. So just stop fighting me, and I'll let you go, okay? Promise me you'll stop, and I'll go in there and talk to him." I stopped writhing, and she let me go. For a split second, I considered doing something moronic just so she'd put her arms around me again.

"Just make it quick, Minna," I muttered. I wasn't sure how long I'd be able to contain myself. She turned, opened the door, and ducked inside. I leaned on the opposite wall, as far from the room as I could. I pressed my forehead to the cool white paint, but it did nothing to ease my blazing anger. After what seemed like no more than a few seconds, Minna emerged from Mr. Ross' room and closed the door behind her.

"Well?" I asked. Minna just shook her head, disappointed.

"He's not going to do anything about it. He can't undo it, and he won't apologise."

The anger I felt was almost blinding. I think my vision literally started to go black around the edges. I gave an animal cry and charged towards the door once more, but Minna was too fast for me. Her slender fingers snatched me by the wrist and pulled me back. She looked up and down the hall quickly

as I struggled against her grip. I just wanted to kill our teacher, that was all. Why was she stopping me, damn it? I was surprised again at how strong she was.

"Come on, Jamie," she said, and walked quickly down the hall, half-dragging me by the hand behind her. I didn't object because it was hardly registering in my mind. I didn't know or care where we were going, but I knew that I was mad, and it was filling me with the wonderful, dangerous energy that I usually experienced just before someone found themselves flat on the floor and with some body part hurting rather badly. Generally, there was a ring of people around, shouting '*Fight! Fight!*' But there was nobody here to hit them or to watch me hit them. Just Minna. And I would never hurt Minna.

She took me down the stairs and along the gym hallway. The gym was closed this period and the corridor was totally empty. Minna let me go, and I flung myself at the wall, breathing fast and trying to calm down.

"We can talk to the principal later," she said calmly, her voice hardly penetrating my brain. "He'll have to make Mr. Ross apologise, punish him, or something."

Nope, still wasn't feeling better. Something had to die. I wound back and slammed my fist into the wall.

"Oh, Jamie, don't do that; you'll..."

"OWWW!"

"...hurt yourself," she said with a laugh as I shook my now-throbbing hand about. She caught my eye, and we both started to laugh. God, I was ridiculous. It's only a kiss. Why did I get so flustered about it?

I leaned against the wall and slid down to the floor. Minna took a seat next to me. We looked at each other again and broke out in giggles once more.

"Sorry about all that," I muttered.

"No problem," she replied. I had never known her to lie. It wasn't a problem. She'd kept an eye on me for years, and she'd always tried to take care of me and stop me from doing stupid things. Lord only knows how many more fights I would have been in if Minna hadn't been there to talk me out of it or, more than once, hold me back. I knew, though we never spoke of it, that I would probably have been expelled for fighting by now if it weren't for her.

Soon enough, my heart rate was back to normal and I wasn't seeing the world through a red haze. And though the silence was not awkward, I felt the need to speak, to grasp at whatever weak bright side there was to this innermost-circle-of-Hell situation.

"Well, I mean..." I said slowly. "At least it wasn't... you know... a big-deal sort of kiss." I nearly smacked myself upside the head. How stupid can I be to say that? But Minna hummed in assent and nodded slightly.

Then a pause, this one pointedly awkward, as I could almost hear her thinking.

"Um, well..." she said. "It was kind of a big deal."

I turned to look at her, curious. She blushed and looked down.

"It was my first kiss," she concluded.

I wasn't shocked, but I was amazed. Minna had... She had let me be.... She had decided that I... I was going to be the first person—the first girl—she ever kissed.

Well, if we were in a confessional mood...

"Yeah?" I replied. I looked at her again, and this time she met my eyes, nodding slightly. "Mine, too," I said quietly.

This time we both looked away, blushing. After a moment, though, I felt something that made my breath hitch. Her hand laced into mine, and we looked at each other once more, smiling. Emboldened by this, there was something I had to be sure of.

"Minna? Do you like me? You know, like, *like me* like me? Like, really *like*?" Oh well, that was as articulate as a preschooler explaining the theory of quantum physics. Good job, Jamie. Why don't you just go pitch yourself off a cliff, asking stupid questions like that? But... what if she says—

"Yes. I do." Minna's sweet voice cut through my internal ramblings. "You?" she asked in a fake conversational tone. She was a horrible liar. I could tell she was just as nervous as I was.

"Well, uh... yeah," I said, breaking away from the grip of her eyes and leaning my head against the wall. She did the same, both of us looking across the hallway pensively. "I do. I really do. Actually, I might even..."

Oh, crap! Don't be stupid, Jamie! Don't say that!

She looked towards me again. "What?" she asked, nerves, excitement, and hope penetrating her voice.

"Nothing! Um, nothing," I said far too loudly. But she looked into my eyes again with her kind, brown ones, smiling. She knew. Of course, she knew; I was stupid to think otherwise. But she gave my hand a squeeze, which said quite clearly, 'I know exactly how you feel.' And there was only one way that could be true, and Minna never lied.

I dismissed the thought for the time being, not daring to even think about it too hard for fear of breaking it.

Minna stood, pulling me up with her by our laced fingers. She drew me a step closer to her, then tentatively put her hands on my waist. I reached up, placing my hands on her shoulders. She smiled and leaned confidently towards me, hesitating for just a moment before her lips finally found mine for the second time in as many days.

We stood frozen for the briefest moment before she pulled away and kissed me again.

The closest thing I could think of to describe it would be as though a warm bolt of lightning hit me every time her mouth touched mine, sending shivers all the way down to my toes.

In the dim light of a deserted school hallway, Minna pulled me even closer to her. I could feel the warmth radiating from her body. One thought, a simple, adolescent, true, but not very deep thought, managed to rise out of the melty Jell-O thing that my brain was becoming: '*Gosh, but she's a good kisser...*' And as soon as it arose, the thought fell back into the soft, pleasant recesses of my mind. All I wanted, all I knew in the world, was us. Nothing else existed.

I think that there are scientific records to show that at that moment, the vast majority of the universe ceased to exist. As much as I was unable to put together a coherent sentence in my mind, one thing was very clear: *This was right*. No, this was awesome. This was the best thing. *This was it*. Positively, nothing else in the world mattered—not one stupid thing—as long as I was with her.

Eventually, we broke apart. It couldn't have been long, but really, time had lost all significance for the moment. Minna was smiling, I was smiling, and this time we did not cast our eyes away from each other's. There was no shyness right now; it had melted away like ice in the sun. She took both of my hands in hers, and I felt another wonderful shiver radiate up my arms and along my spine.

"Come on, Jamie," she said. "It's getting late, we should grab some lunch before all the pizza is gone." I nodded, and she led me down the hall towards the cafeteria, her hand never leaving mine even as we walked into the crowded lunch area brimming with students.

What more could I have asked for? Minna was with me, like she had always been, only more so now. She had been my first kiss. I wanted her to be my hundredth, my thousandth, my millionth.

The End