



**STRAWBERRY
LIPS**

by
Alessa

Strawberry Lips

by Alessa

I hit the 'call' button on my cell phone and held it against my ear, waiting for my best friend to answer. Opening up another closet in the living room, I pushed the various jackets and coats aside to look inside. A sigh escaped my lips when I realised the closet was empty and the little blonde devil was still missing in action.

"Hannah?" Jessie's questionable voice greeted me.

"I think I just lost your sister," I blurted out, twirling a strand of light brown hair around my finger out of nervous habit.

There was silence on the other end of the phone line.

"Jessie?" I asked, hoping she hadn't hung up on me. It wouldn't surprise me these days. Jessie and I hadn't talked in a week, and it had been the longest seven days of my life. "Are you there?"

"Yeah," my best friend finally answered, giving me some sense of relief. "Do you think you could repeat yourself? You were talking pretty fast, and for a second there, I thought you said you lost my little sister."

"Yeah, about that... I kind of did."

"You lost my sister? I didn't even know you were with her!"

I paused before responding, trying to think of a way to explain how I lost Tilly.

Was there any way to go about this without ruining my friendship with Jessie? I mean, how often are friendships broken up by lost younger siblings? And, on top of this horrible incident, there was the party last week...

Shit.

I was so screwed.

"Well, here's the thing," I trailed off, walking into the kitchen and opening up the refrigerator. "Your mom called yesterday after school and asked me to babysit Tilly while you were at the morning practise. I didn't see a problem with it since I didn't have any plans today, so I told her I would. And it was all going really well until Tilly decided she wanted to play hide and seek."

"You lost my sister while playing hide and seek?"

"I like to think of it as she is still hiding, and I am still seeking." I stopped talking when I realised I was looking for a five-year-old girl in the fridge.

I was losing my mind.

Who looks for a little girl in the fridge?

God, I should have never called her. I probably just destroyed our friendship in a matter of minutes.

"Hannah..." Jessie groaned, and I could just imagine her running a hand through her dirty blonde locks in frustration.

"She's probably somewhere in the house! I just haven't, you know, found her yet..."

"You lost my little sister."

"You know she likes to play tricks on me! I bet she is watching me freak out now from her secret hiding place and laughing at my misery!" I finally gave up looking for Tilly and pushed myself onto the kitchen counter. I swung one leg over the other and continued rambling. "I mean, no offence, Jessie, but your little sister is the reincarnation of the devil. How could so much evil be inside one little girl, especially one as cute as Tilly? It just doesn't make any sense. It's always the cute ones you have to watch out for. And why does she always try to—"

"Hannah?" Jessie interrupted my rant.

"Yeah?" I answered, trying to calm my rapidly beating heart.

"I'm coming over."

"No! I have it under control! Seriously, you don't have to—"

There was a soft click, and my ear was suddenly met with the sound of the phone's dial tone. I slowly pulled my cell phone away from my ear and took a deep breath to calm my jittery nerves. I threw the phone on the kitchen counter and put my head in my hands.

Jessie had just hung up on me.

I was so dead.



I heard the front door of the house slam closed, and a couple of seconds later, Jessie stormed into the room, the door swinging back and forth behind her.

"Have you found her?"

"Does it look like I have found her?" I snapped, gesturing to the surrounding room.

Jessie rolled her eyes and strode towards my spot on the counter. With her long legs, it only took a couple of steps before she was standing directly in front of me. She took a deep breath and placed her hands on my legs. I could feel the warmth of her palms radiating through my jeans.

"Have you checked all the hiding places in the house?" she asked.

I scoffed, "What do you think I have been doing for the last two hours? Making myself a pizza? Of course, I have already checked every place in the house. I even looked in the refrigerator! The fridge, Jessie!"

Jessie's eyes widened, and she raised her hands in a mock surrender, "Geez, I was just making sure. You don't need to go all crazy on me."

"I'm sorry," I spoke, apologising for losing my temper and losing her little sister.

Jessie spoke gently, "I know, Hannah. To be honest, I don't even know if I can blame you. It's just so like Tilly to pull something like this."

"It's just that I haven't talked to you in a week, and then I call you out of the blue to tell you that I lost your little sister. What kind of friend loses someone's little sister?"

She let out a short chuckle, "Let's just focus on finding her, okay? I don't know about you, but I would not like to be killed by my parents when they come home. I'm much too young to die."

I smiled softly, "I guess I want to make it to my fifteenth birthday, too."

Jessie returned the grin, moving her hands from my thighs to my waist, and I couldn't help but let out a soft gasp at the feelings her touch caused.

I mentally scolded myself.

Now was definitely not the time to be acting on my ridiculous teenage hormones. Sure, Jessie gave me butterflies and, as much as I have tried to deny it, her touch could set my skin on fire, but I had a more important thing to worry about. I should've been focusing on the task at hand—finding her little sister.

Tightening her grip on my waist, Jessie picked me up off the counter and set my feet firmly on the ground.

"I could have hopped down myself," I said, straightening myself out and wiping some imaginary dust off of my jeans.

"Yeah, but I like helping you out," Jessie replied automatically.

"Oh."

"And it doesn't really help that you have a tendency to be a walking disaster," she pointed out, starting to walk out of the kitchen. "I could just see you slipping on the floor on your way down, and then I would have to worry about finding Tilly and making sure you weren't hurt."

"Well, thanks for the boost of confidence," the sarcasm rolled off of my tongue as I followed her into the living room.

"Anytime," Jessie responded, and grabbed a jacket out of the closet I had searched earlier. She pulled the blue material over her shoulders before grabbing another one and handing it to me. Here, put this on."

I stared at her with confusion etched across my face. "Why?"

"Just put the jacket on, Hannah."

I grabbed it out of her grasp and slipped my arms into the sleeves. Being almost two years my senior, her dark green jacket was a good size or two too big for me. The material smelled faintly like Jessie, a mixture of cinnamon and vanilla, and something I couldn't put my finger on.

"Why do we need jackets anyway?" I asked, pulling the zipper all the way up. "It's like five degrees above boiling in your house."

Jessie looked at me like I was crazy. "Why would I make you wear a jacket in the house?"

"Aren't we looking for your sister?"

"Yeah, I figured we could walk around the neighbourhood." Jessie explained, opening the front door.

"You said you already searched all the hiding spots in the house. I trust you, Hannah."



No words were spoken between us as we walked down the sidewalks in her neighbourhood.

Instead, I listened to the sound of the wind brushing through the fallen tree leaves and tried to think of anything but Jessie's words. It didn't work, and I couldn't help but play the words over and over again in my head until they were etched in my mind.

We hadn't talked in seven days, and now she was saying things like, 'I trust you.'

And after I had just lost her little sister!

How could she trust me if she wasn't even willing to talk to me?

I needed to stop thinking, or I was going to give myself a headache.

"So," I trailed off, trying to break the silence. "Nice weather today, huh?"

Jessie looked at me, slightly startled by my voice, and I took the chance to study her.

Her eyes were wide and wild, all the different hues swirling together in a pool of dark blue. It was the first time I really looked at her in a week, and I didn't think I would be able to look away—not before I

had a chance to memorise every feature. With the way she had avoided me at school all week, who knew when I'd be able to see these blue eyes up close again?

And was it just me, or did she seem taller than the last time I saw her?

"Really?" Jessie asked, raising a hand to point at the sky. "You're asking about the weather? Which, by the way, is anything but pleasant. It looks like it is about to downpour."

She was mocking me!

Here I was, trying to actually talk to her and work through these awkward feelings between us, and all she could do was mock my topic for a conversation! Well, whatever, I didn't need her conversation to keep me company while we looked for Tilly. We could search for her in silence for all I cared!

I glared at Jessie from the corner of my eye to show her how angry I was, and her expression immediately softened.

"Uh, come on, Hannah," she grinned at me. "I was just joking around. We can talk about the weather if you want."

"I don't want to talk about anything with you right now," I responded, looking anywhere but at her face. "I just want to find Tilly and then go home."

Jessie didn't respond, and I took that as her way of agreeing to stay silent.

It's not that I didn't want to talk to her. I did. I really wanted to talk to her.

But I knew that until we talked about what happened last weekend, the awkward elephant in the room would stay wedged between us. And I had a feeling that it would stay there for a while because if I knew one thing about Jessie from all of our years of friendship, it was that she wasn't the kind of girl who liked to openly talk about her feelings.

God, why does being a teenager have to suck so much?

A girl could only take so much teenage angst, drama, and confusion before she completely lost it.

Jessie and I came to a stop at the corner of the sidewalk and patiently waited for the pedestrian light to flash green and read 'walk.' I knew from all of my visits to Jessie's neighbourhood and our trips to the park that the playground was only about one block away.

It's so weird to think about how much time has passed since then—about how much we have changed, everything we have been through together in the years of our friendship, and how much we have grown up.

"I'm sorry." Jessie spoke the words so softly, I almost thought I imagined them.

"What?" I asked.

The light finally flashed green, and Jessie grabbed my hand as we crossed the street together. My hand was now tingling where her fingers touched mine, and I stared at the side of her face in confusion.

"I'm sorry," she said again, her voice louder this time. "I don't know why I kissed you at Kevin's party. At first, I only did it because Chris had been following me around all night and I wanted to get him off my back. But then I saw that dazed look in those big green eyes of yours, and I don't know what came over me... I just had to kiss you again."

"Jessie, we don't have to talk about it if you don't want."

"No, we do need to talk about it, Hannah. We can't just keep tip-toeing around it and expect things to be okay."

"Hey!" I protested, pulling my hand out of hers. "I'm not the one who dropped off the face of the planet and ceased all contact. That was you. You were the one who avoided me all week."

"I didn't know what to do," Jessie confessed, running a hand through her blonde hair like I had imagined earlier. "Do you think it's easy for me? I tried to talk to you on Monday, but I didn't know what to say. *'Hey, I'm sorry for kissing you on Saturday. Your lips tasted like strawberries, and I think I really like you and want to do it again, but I understand if you don't want to be friends anymore.'* Yeah, I don't think so."

"My lips taste like strawberries?" I asked, bringing my fingers to my lips.

She rolled her eyes, "That's seriously all you got out of this conversation? I tell you that I think I like you, and you ask me about the way your lips taste?"

"You like me?"

Jessie smiled softly and said, "Yes, Hannah, I like you. I think I have for a while and just didn't realise it."

"Then, why didn't you tell me?" I asked. "Why didn't you say something?"

"I couldn't," she answered. "I didn't want to ruin our friendship. I couldn't handle the thought of you not liking me back, so I figured I could give myself some time to get over it—to get over you."

"Did you?"

"No," Jessie sighed. "I didn't."

"Well, good."

"Good?"

"Yeah," I said as I grabbed her hand. "I don't want you to get over it."

"What do you want me to do?" Jessie asked.

"I want you to ask me—" I lost my train of thought when I realised we had made it to the park, and my gaze zeroed in on a bunch of kids jumping around in the park's fountain.

I focused my attention on them, searching for a familiar head of curly blonde hair.

A wide smile broke out on my lips when I saw her, jumping around with another girl around her age.

"Tilly Owens!" I screamed loudly, running towards her. "You are in so much trouble!"



Tilly jumped out of the fountain and wrapped her short arms around me. I could feel her wet pink shorts and white T-shirt soaking into my clothes, but I refused to let go.

"Don't you ever scare me like that again!" I yelled, hugging her tightly to myself.

When my heart finally calmed down, I placed her back on the floor. I held a hand on my hips and tapped my foot against the pavement as I waited for an explanation that wouldn't lead to my arrest for strangling a five-year-old girl.

"Well," I goaded her. "I'm waiting."

Tilly smiled sheepishly, "It wasn't my fault."

"What do you mean it wasn't your fault?" I asked frantically, waving my hands around for dramatic effect. "What kind of kid asks their babysitter to play hide and seek and then runs away to the park? You gave me a heart attack, Tilly! I had to call your sister!"

"It wasn't my fault!" She pointed her finger behind me. "It was her fault. She paid me twenty dollars and told me to go to the park with Mrs. Walsh and her kids! She walked me to her house!"

I spun around, looking at the person Tilly was pointing at.

Jessie stood behind me, her hands in her pockets, and an even more sheepish smile than her sister's.

"You little tattle-tale," Jessie said, narrowing her eyes at her sister. "I want my twenty dollars back!"

Tilly shook her head and ran back into the fountain, ignoring the daggers her sister was glaring at her. She immediately resumed playing with the other children, splashing water around and jumping up and down in it.

I looked back at her sister, who was twisting her hands behind her back, a habit of hers when she got nervous. Well, she had every right to be nervous right now.

"You bribed your little sister to run away while I was babysitting?" I asked, my voice shaking. "You lied to me! You said you didn't even know that I was with her! Why would you pay her to run away, you... you crazy person!"

"Hannah," Jessie's voice was cautious. "Calm down. You're being hysterical. I paid her to go to the park so I could finally talk to you."

"You are crazy!" I yelled, taking a step closer to her. "You couldn't have just talked to me while I was babysitting her? No. You had to pay your little sister to run away while I was babysitting and give me a

heart attack. I looked everywhere for her, and you knew where she was the whole time! What kind of person does that? I looked in the fridge, Jessie! Your family is absolutely crazy! I swear-"

Jessie pressed her warm lips against mine, efficiently silencing any thoughts from entering my brain.

I could only feel her soft lips moving against mine. Jessie slipped a finger through my belt loop and pulled me even closer to her. I had no choice but to wrap my hands around her neck, playing with the ends of her hair and having internal debates about whether I should kiss her or strangle her. The heat was radiating off of both of us, and I could barely feel the nip of the cold wind on my cheeks.

Her hands wrapped around my waist, tightening her hold. I moaned a little, and Jessie took the opportunity to slip her tongue past my lips. There were so many feelings rushing through my body. I didn't know if I could take it anymore.

I quickly pushed her away before we were spotted for disorderly conduct on a children's playground. I was quite sure that the display had passed PG-13 and was headed in the direction of being rated R.

"You still taste like strawberries," she breathed. "Go out with me."

I smirked at her and decided to mess with her a little. It was the least she deserved for putting me through a week of hell and then giving me a heart attack this morning.

Sorry, Jessie, I don't like girls."

Her face fell in despondent recognition. "I was afraid you didn't."

"No, I don't," I repeated, smiling. "Not until they beg and make some grand display of their intense liking of me. I think it's the least you could do, Jessie."

Jessie smirked, backing up, so her knees were touching the water fountain, "I'd do anything for you, Hannah."

And, with that, she jumped up on the edge of the fountain and commanded the attention of everyone in the park, "Ladies and Gentlemen, children, and devils named Tilly, I would like to show you all how much I intensely like my future girlfriend, Hannah Matthews."

Oh, God.

Maybe this wasn't the best idea.

"Jessie," I hissed. "Get down from there."

"You see, my dear Hannah here," she smiled down at me. "Well, she is the sun! She arises and kills the envious moon! Something about a maid and jealousy... oh yeah, and her eyes are the fairest stars in all the heavens, and they twinkle! Like that little star! And I want to, you know, touch her cheek with my hand! Basically, my girlfriend-to-be is really awesome, and she is also really hot. Oh, and her lips taste like strawberries!"

I couldn't take it anymore.

She was making fools out of both of us.

I made sure there were no children in the fountain behind her, and then I went for it. I charged at her and knocked her off the ledge until we both landed in the fountain. We hit the water with a cold splash, and I landed on top of Jessie's chest in about two inches of water.

Jessie was laughing like an idiot. "Was that enough of a grand display?"

I sat up on her lap and hit her in the shoulder, "Yeah, yeah, Romeo. It was fine. I didn't even know you could attempt to quote Shakespeare, no matter how terrible that attempt might have been."

"I did pay attention in English, you know."

"Sure, you did." I laughed, splashing water in her face.

"Shut up and kiss me, Hannah, or I'll dunk you in two inches of water."

The End