



tag of love

**by
Alessa**

Tag of Love

by Alessa

I just made a mistake. Not a little one, like eating a third cookie when I was only supposed to eat two, or forgetting to answer the last question on my homework assignment.

Nope, this is bigger than all of those things combined—bigger than if I multiplied that number by 100.

Because, here's why. I just rang the doorbell of the coolest, most amazing girl in my entire school.

I'm not exactly sure where I gathered the courage to visit her house. I had never been here before, but here I am, and it's too late to go back. I had been quite confident when I left my house, but the second the doorbell rang, the confidence drained from me faster than I could take my finger off the bell.

Should I just run away? I mean, I'm twelve, and I shouldn't be going around poking my nose at strange houses. What if this is the wrong address and I get kidnapped or something?

But there's no time to run now. A shiver snakes down my spine when I hear someone rustling inside.

I try to deepen my scowl. Everyone knows looking angry is cool, and I don't want to seem any less cool than the coolest for my friend.

The door swings open after a few more seconds, and an older woman fills the pathway, probably her mother. The woman's voice is warm and friendly, and I immediately feel comforted when she greets me.

"Hello, how can I help you?"

"Umm... yes, I... can I speak with Mia, please?" I try to sound confident as I stutter out my question, and the kind woman seems amused as she turns away, stating that she would be glad to get her daughter.

I'm left in silence again, and I run one hand through my long black hair nervously as I wait. An autumn wind rustles some leaves behind me, and I wish I had worn a hoodie over my T-shirt. Paired with worn jeans, I don't think I'm all that fashionable. Not for a girl like Mia.

Perhaps I should just run for it. My palms are sweating, and I'm looking around for an easy escape...

But it's too late.

I inhale sharply as the reason I came appears at the door, peering curiously into the darkness. I'm always amazed at how pretty she looks, but now with the light out of her house contrasting with the darkness, I'm standing in... well, I'm blown away. With blond hair that comes to her chin and a smile that could brighten the darkest of days, Mia is everything I know I could never be.

I still can't believe she agreed to be friends with me. The two of us had been working together in English class since the beginning of the semester, and after hours of consideration, I finally decided to make my move.

"Becky!" Her eyes light up as she recognises me, but this only causes the butterflies in my stomach to worsen tenfold. "What are you doing here?" Mia seems pleasantly surprised, which I suppose is a good thing. And it's a very good question, too. Why am I here?

I did have a reason; oh yes, that's right...

"Uh..." I tangle my fingers together and glance down as I hesitate. Talking to people one-on-one has never been easy for me, and unfortunately, that only seems to get worse when I'm around Mia. "Would you like to go for a walk with me?"

Mia seems phased by my question for a moment, but she quickly shakes it off as she glances at her watch. "Sure, I'd love to! One second, let me grab my coat."

She disappears into her house, and I let out a breath I didn't realise I was holding. That went surprisingly well, and I feel a rush of excitement as my friend steps back into the doorway, tugging a light jacket over her shoulders as she walks out. She shouts a goodbye to her parents and steps out, shutting the door firmly behind her. "Where to?"

"I was thinking we could walk down to the park."

If I said I didn't do research before coming over here, I'd be lying. But I won't admit that to Mia. My heart couldn't handle that much embarrassment in one day.

"It's only a few minutes from here, right?" I feign ignorance, and she nods. No need to tell her I had just visited the park to ensure we would be left alone.

I let her pass me on the porch, leaning in ever so slightly as warmth and a slight scent of her hair draw me closer. I shake my head to clear it when she steps off her porch.

I follow her quickly, not wanting her to wonder why I hesitated. The two of us walk down to the street and fall comfortably into step, side by side. By now Mia is probably wondering why I invited her for a walk, but I simply stuff my hands in my pockets as she glances at me, although it must be difficult to see me in the dark.

"So... that test was hard today, huh?"

I imagine she's smiling when she answers, "Yes! Oh my god, it was so tough, especially the true-false. I had no clue for half of them."

"Right? I think I had true for the first three, then false for the last two." The two of us had just taken an English test earlier that day, and I'm relieved that others had difficulty with it too. That test was brutal. Mia tilts her head slightly, recalling her own answers, and I hope it doesn't look like I'm staring. The street lights spin a golden glow around her hair, and I shiver.

"I think I had false for the first one," Mia's voice twists thoughtfully as she responds. Seems like I had a different answer too, but oh well, Mia has always been better at English than me, no doubt she did better on the test than I did.

"Whoops," I shrug, it's not worth worrying about now. "I thought the reading was easier this time."

"Yeah..." The two of us settle into a relaxed silence, and I'm grateful it feels easy and natural.

A gush of wind hits me from behind, and I chuckle when Mia slips her hands into her pockets.

"It's kind of cold today, isn't it?" I agree with a grunt and furrow my eyebrows together when I realise her gaze is locked on my bare arms. "Aren't you cold?"

I shrug for the second time that night, grateful that the darkness covers the goose bumps I'm sure are running up and down my forearms. "Nah, I can handle much colder than this."

"Heh, that's really cool." Mia seems genuinely impressed by my cool façade, and I can just make out her brown eyes locking onto me.

I glance away quickly. Nope, there's no blush on my face—none at all. All she did was call you cool. Don't overreact, Becky.

I'm pleased anyway, and if I wasn't blushing before, I definitely am now because Mia giggles quietly at my reaction. Oh, what a cute giggle. I wasn't prepared for that. I wasn't prepared for any of this. Why did I come again? Did I really think she would be interested? How stupid can I be? I don't even know if she likes girls. There's probably a next-to-no chance she sees me that way. I'm so pathetic. I should just leave now while she's giggling. She might not notice if I run off into the night.

"You're so cute, Becky."

Wait, what? The negative thoughts take a back seat as my head snaps back to her, only to see her turn away nonchalantly, leading me up a path next to the street. I was so distracted, I didn't even notice we were almost at the park.

The path leading to the park is relatively short, and a few street lights are scattered around the area.

Fortunately, the park is still deserted. It's a small park with one large structure and two swings off to the side. Mia heads over to the swings, so I follow slowly, not wanting to seem too eager. I sit down on the left swing, pushing off with my feet and allowing myself to rock back and forward slowly. Swings have always had a calming effect on me, and when I glance over at Mia, I see her also swinging happily. The lights allow me to make out a soft smile that's settled onto her face, and despite my efforts to scowl, I find myself grinning. I focus on getting my swing up to speed.

The two of us swing in silence for a while, but after a while Mia comes to a stop, glancing up at the stars. "It's really nice out tonight."

I follow her gaze. There sure are a lot of stars out tonight. "Yeah..."

"We've been learning about the stars in my astronomy class." Mia's eyes are still locked on the sky, but I glance over. "I can tell you about some of them if you want."

"Sure." Honestly, I've never been that interested in the stars, but if Mia is interested in them, I'll gladly listen. Mia takes one hand off her swing, pointing directly above our heads.

"That's Orion; see how the three stars go diagonally across? That's his belt; it's said that he was a great hero in his time. Next to him is Calliope, then over there are Canus Major and Canus Minor." Even though I'm supposed to be looking at the stars, my entire being is focused on the enthusiastic girl beside me. I've never seen her so excited about something. I think it makes her even more beautiful and radiant, but of course I would never say that to her. Instead, I just nod my head, making sure to shift my eyes upward when her head turns towards me.

"Thanks for inviting me out, Becky," her eyes glow with happiness. "This is really fun."

"Uh, yeah... no problem," I glance down at the ground, not wanting to make eye contact, which would reveal just how much I'm prepared to do for her.

Suddenly, I feel a tap on my shoulder, and when I look back up, Mia is running away, giggling as she jumps onto the play structure. "Tag, you're it!"

Tag? Now, that's a game I haven't played in years, but I feel a rush of adrenaline as my shoulder tingles warmly from where Mia tapped me. Never one to back down from a challenge, I slide off the swing laughing and race towards my friend, "I'm gonna get you!"

As I step onto the structure, Mia skips up the steps away from me, and I can feel my competitiveness kick in. A slide is connected to the highest point of the wooden complex, and Mia sits down on it as I reach the top step.

"Bye Becky," she winks at me once before pushing down the slide, and for a second I just watch in amusement. Once she's cleared the slide, I jet down, noting that she's abandoned the structure and has started running across the grass towards the entrance of the park. She glances over her shoulder as she runs, and I smile at her when her eyes meet mine. Her head snaps back around quickly, and I take off in her direction. Being good at sports gives me an easy advantage, so I quickly catch up to her.

I reach out with my left hand to tap her arm, but at the last second, Mia ducks to her right. Another stream of giggles escapes her lips.

Oh, she thinks she's so sneaky... but I'll show her.

I take one more large step and extend my right arm out, easily looping it around her slim waist. "I've got you now." I smirk triumphantly, locking my arm when Mia tries to slide out of my grasp.

After a few seconds, she stops struggling, and one hand comes up to rest on my arm. "Yeah, you do." Her voice comes out softer than normal, and I tilt my chin down towards her in surprise.

Suddenly, her back brushes lightly against my chest, and in an instant, I drop my arm, face flushing vermilion. Wow, good job, Becky; you trapped her like a predator catches its prey. That's the exact

opposite of what I wanted to do. I try to force a reassuring smile onto my face as Mia turns towards me with a puzzled expression. But this time the park lights illuminate my obvious blush. I look off to the left nervously, not really focusing on any one thing. Maybe I should apologise. It was pretty weird... She's probably freaking out now.

Right as I'm about to look back and murmur out a "sorry", I feel her grab my hand, giving it a light tug. When I turn my head back, Mia is grinning happily, a light blush of her own spreading across her cheeks.

"Let's head back, Becky."

I nod once and allow myself to be tugged back towards the street. And then a sudden rush of warmth hits me when I feel Mia rotate her hand so we can lace our fingers.

I had never put much value in handholding, but boy, would my friends make fun of me if they could see me now, blushing and stammering. I feel like skipping from happiness, but that would only make me look like a five-year-old kid instead of the love-struck twelve-year-old that I am.

Well, screw my friends. They're not the ones holding hands with the prettiest girl in school.

The two of us walk back in complete silence, but my mind is racing the whole time. I want to say something—say how much I enjoyed her company, how happy she made me feel tonight—but I know if I tried to speak now, it would probably come out all muddled and incomprehensible. Better to just stay quiet and pretend to be confident.

When we reach her home, I walk Mia slowly up to the door, wanting to draw out every second of my time with her. At the door, she slowly draws her hand from mine, and I immediately miss the warm touch of her skin.

"Thanks again, Becky. See you in school tomorrow," Mia smiles shyly at me, and I have to mentally slap myself to stop gawking at her as if I'd seen a deity. The door behind Mia swings open, and her little brother is lingering at the entrance.

"Mom says to come inside before you get cold," her little brother sounds annoyed, and Mia waves him off with one hand.

"I guess I should go then."

I nod, noting that the kid brother is now gaping at me from the doorway. "Yeah, you should."

Mia nods back, inhaling deeply, "Right... bye, Becky."

I open my mouth to respond, but suddenly shut it when Mia's hand comes up and rests on my shoulder. She rises swiftly on her tiptoes and plants a soft peck on my left cheek, then disappears into the house.

As the door shuts, I can hear her little brother asking if I'm her new girlfriend, which is only met with shy laughter.

Meanwhile, I'm frozen on the porch, and that pesky blush just won't leave me alone. I touch my cheek gingerly where her lips just kissed it, then turn and slowly walk down the front steps of her porch, happier than I thought I could ever be.

The End