

A Nine and the Six

By GL4Ever

Chapter Two

"So you have to move out?"

I nodded. We had already made our introductions and I had learned that the girl's name was Lacey. Now, as we closed in on the small town, she sat beside me and held the un-crumpled letter my landlord had left for me in her hands.

"Why?" she asked.

I shrugged. "Don't know yet. Just got that when I left. I'll have to catch up with her later and see what's up."

Lacey folded the paper twice and set it down between us on the seat and pointed up ahead. "See that sign for the egg farm? Turn left there."

"So you live with chickens," I joked.

The girl smiled. "The farm is the other direction. But we're goin' to my friend's house. My parents aren't home."

I turned left onto the old gravel road. The chicken farm sign was painted in a shade of green that reminded me of rotten eggs instead of fresh one's and the farm's logo contained a tuxedo wearing chicken who was juggling eggs. Lacey commented on how lame it was, and I agreed. I had been forced to see that sign each and every time I drove into town for the past few years and somehow, each repainting it received suggested even more rotten eggs.

Once on the gravel road, Lacey immediately livened up and moved to sit on her knees facing me. "I'm so glad I don't have to ride that bike on this road!"

"The gravel?"

She nodded. "Yeah, makes it hard to steer. And then a car will go by and all that dust makes me want to suffocate."

"I can imagine," I said. "I used to have motorcycle years ago and it was the same way."

"And the bumps really make my butt sore," she added.

I laughed. "So your parents let you drive around out here?"

"Yep," she said cheerily. "I can pretty much do whatever I want. Especially when they are gone."

If she had said it in any other way, I wouldn't have thought much of it. But it was the way she said it that told me she was actually serious. She could pretty much do whatever she wanted. I decided then that I didn't care for her parents very much even though I knew nothing about them. It was no wonder she was stranded on the side of the road and ended up in the cab of a truck with a stranger.

"How old are you?" I asked, genuinely curious.

Again, Lacey pointed up ahead. "Third house on the right. Can't see it because of the trees so watch for the mail box."

"Ok."

"Twelve," she said. "Well, eleven actually. I'll be twelve at the end of the month."

I was surprised. "You seem older," I told her.

"Yeah, I get that a lot."

I pulled into the driveway Lacey had instructed me to and drove along a row of tall pine trees until we were in front of the house. Lacey told me to hang on as she jumped out and ran up to the door. She bounced her way up to the steps and pounded on the screen door.

After a minute and a glance back at me, she jumped off of the steps and walked over to the picture window and peered inside, blocking the sun with her hands. It took her a full thirty seconds to run completely around the house and end up back at my truck. I opened my window for her.

"Let me guess," I said. "They saw you walk up and refused to let you in."

Lacey tilted her head and smirked. "Funny. They're not home, bonehead."

I grinned. "Ahh. Insults. Now I see why they won't let you in."

Finally she smiled. "My house is back the way you came."

I motioned with my head to the passenger side and while rolling up my window, she ran around the truck and jumped inside.

Town was as quiet as always. Aside from the few people walking about and the occasional car on the road, there wasn't much going on. We had taken one of the most infrequently driven highways into town. If we had come from the east or west, we would have been on a much busier highway that runs through this little town as if it didn't even exist and stretches out to either side of the state. Most who travel on that road have no intention to stop in this little town.

After crossing the intersecting highway, we were in downtown, as if that could have any meaning here. Most of the small shops and gas stations were here in this section of town, and Lacey watched the people on the sidewalk as we drove by. I made a right and a left, entered the only other area of town that could be thought of as a business district, and pulled in to the supermarket's parking lot.

"You work here?"

"Nope," I said, grinning.

Lacey hopped out of the truck as I did. "Then why are you getting a paycheck here?"

As we met and walked toward the sliding glass doors, I said, "You asked if I work here. I don't work. I make sure everyone else does."

"So you do work here?"

I laughed. "I don't consider it working, but yeah. I'm the assistant manager."

"Oh, joy," she said. "Sounds like a blast."

I pushed her away. "Thanks," I said. "And I thought I had finally found my calling here."

Lacey looked up at me with her wide eyes and a very serious look on her face. "I'm really sorry," she said. "I didn't know it was so important to you."

I laughed again. "This job sucks. I was just messing with ya."

After getting punched in the arm and dodging her attempts to trip me, we walked into the store and she followed me to the back. Lacey waited by the fresh vegetables section while I went into the employees' area further back. Aside from the sounds of paper being torn, plastic being shaken, and loaders stacking boxes from the usual Friday

delivery, I could here voices coming from the employee lounge.

This lounge was more of a hole in the wall with a picnic table, but we liked to call it a lounge to make our breaks more official. Out of these voices, I heard one that was all too familiar. I almost dreaded walking into that room. She was one of the most beautiful girls in town, absolutely the most beautiful girl who worked here at the store, and the most aggravating person I've ever met. In other words, she was my most recent on again, off again, ex girlfriend.

"Kyle," Cathy said as I walked into the lounge. "Are you working today, hun?"

"Fortunately not," I was more than happy to say. "Just getting the cash."

Billy and Shauna were sitting at the table with her and said their hellos. They were seniors in high school, and had worked her at the supermarket for nearly a year now. They were a couple when they were hired, and have been going strong ever since I met them. Those two weren't easily distracted from each other. I never could figure out how they did it. As appealing the thought was of settling down someday, I couldn't figure out how two people could find each other at such a young age and honestly know they were right for each other. I certainly wasn't as lucky as they had been. They were going somewhere, and doing it together. I still had to figure out where I was going.

After entering in my combination, I opened my locker and pulled out the envelope that contained my check. Never look at your check in front of other employees, they say. Everyone else did. But I had always known that no matter what the amount on my check was, I'd never be happy with it. So I chose not to bother. Instead, I folded it and stuffed it in my back pocket.

I waved to the three others in the lounge, and headed out the door.

"Wait up." It was Cathy. I knew I wasn't going to get out of there that easily. She met me just outside the lounge door.

"What are you doing this weekend?" she asked.

I shrugged. "I don't know yet. Probably just going to enjoy the time off."

"Want some company?" she asked, giving me that look that used to be hard to resist in the old days.

"I don't know," I said. "If I'm feeling up to it, I'll call you. Ok?"

Now she pouted. "You know you want company. You always want company."

She took a few steps closer to me and tugged on the side pocket of my jeans.

"At least you know you want *my* company," she added.

I broke down. It was a little hard not to when she stood less than a foot away from me, forcing me to remember some of the fun we'd had in the past. And her smell. She wore the same perfume as the last time we were together, but whatever it was, it was dangerous for men.

"Saturday," I told her, before I attacked her right where she stood. "Come by around eight. Call ahead, just to be sure something hasn't come up."

She smiled, satisfied. "See ya then."

Once she let go of my jeans, I turned around and hurried away from the lounge.

How in the hell could she do that, I thought. How could she have that affect over me? I was never one to succumb to peer pressure, never one to do anything I didn't want to do. Urges never took over. So how did this one single girl, annoying as all hell as far as I was concerned though no one else seemed to think so, cause me to let my guard down? Damn she was good.

Almost forgetting that I had company, Lacey got my attention as I walked out of the employee's area by holding a carrot in my face. "You're a boss, right?"

"Uh, yeah."

She walked with me. "Well can I have this?"

Assuming she meant the carrot, I glanced down at it. "You hungry or something?"

Lacey nodded. "I haven't ate today."

"Neither have I," I said as I snatched the carrot and tossed it beside some hotdogs. "We'll go get something good, how about that?"

Lacey smiled. "Sounds great! So where's your check?"

I patted my back pocket.

"Yeah," she said. "It's cute. But where's your check?"

I started to laugh, but it was choked out by a bit of shock. "It's in my pocket!"

Lacey giggled, and followed me out of the store.

It was either just me, or an eleven year old girl had just flirted with me.

Lacey and I sat at a table for two in the only fast food joint in town. Burger King. While she worked on a double cheeseburger, I ate as well, and thought about the meaning of her joke. It was something I was having a hard time understanding. In most cases, I wouldn't have thought of it again. But coming from a girl of her age, it stuck in my mind.

She couldn't have actually meant it. I had no doubt that a girl her age wouldn't see anything attractive in someone like me. So that was a given already. Perhaps she was just the flirty type without putting much reality into it. I decided that that was the case, and to let it go. Besides, she seemed to have a little too much freedom for a girl her age. Freedom and flirtation can easily exist together. Though I tried to forget about it, it stuck in my mind anyway.

Lacey finished her sandwich and was nibbling on fries. "Who was that girl?"

I was puzzled. "What girl?"

"The one that watched you leave the store," she said. "Pretty one."

"Cathy?"

She shrugged. "Blonde, skinny."

"Yeah," I said. "Cathy. She's just someone I know."

"Work with you?"

I nodded. "Yeah. She's working now. We dated a while back. Nothing serious."

"Oh." Lacey popped a fry in her mouth. "She stood there and watched us walk to your truck. So do you have a girlfriend now?"

"Nope. Free and loving it."

Another fry. "You should be married by now," Lacey said. "You should have kids and stuff."

I took one of her fries and threw it at her. She let out a little screech. "I'm not that old," I said.

After we exchanged flying fries, and she had to dig one out of her hair, we saw we were being eyed by an employee behind the counter, so we grabbed our drinks and left. Instead of leaving though, we sat at the table outside of the restaurant and finished our shakes. I had learned that Lacey didn't care for chocolate very much. Strawberry

was her favorite. However, I was a true chocolate fan. It was a craving since birth. Without my chocolate, I'd shrivel up and die.

Lacey looked out across the street and sipped the sweet strawberry by the very edges of her lips. I watched her, though I didn't really know why. In some way, she almost fascinated me. I knew that I had a longing just to go home and spend the weekend alone, dreading the moment Cathy would be knocking at my door. Even so much to the point that I may think of something to do to get out of it although I knew damn well I'd love the attention once she got there. But I found myself enjoying this simple time with an almost complete stranger. I'd known Lacey for no more than forty minute, and already she seemed like someone I would be happy to know.

While she sat there, she'd take a sip of her strawberry shake and then let the straw slide across her lips until she was ready for another sip. All the while, her eyes moved here and there watching the few cars on the street and the people walking about. I had to hold in a giggle because I noticed that she wasn't completely lady like in the way she sat. Sometimes she would sit there with her legs spread as if she were wearing a pair of jeans, and once even threw her foot up on the seat. And then, she appeared to catch herself without ever looking down or interrupting her enjoyment of the shake, and cross her leg gently over the other. I guess it was a good thing she was wearing tights under her skirt. Perhaps that was the reason she wore them in the first place.

Trying to get my mind off of Lacey, which I noticed was causing me to space out other things around me, I finished the last of my drink and set it on the marble table. "So where do you need to go now?"

Lacey took one last long sip until her cup was empty, and struggled to keep her brain from freezing. Finally, she set the cup down and looked over at me. "Home, I guess."

I nodded, and tossed our cups into the trash. "I've got to stop by the bank, but other than that I'm ready anytime you are."

Lacey nodded. "Yeah, I guess I'm ready."

If I didn't know better, I'd have to guess that she seemed almost disappointed. I was sure it was just because her friend wasn't home, and that was where she wanted to be. She hadn't come right out and said it, but I assumed she had intended on staying with her

friend while her parents were gone. While I enjoyed being home and being alone, she seemed to want company while her parents weren't home.

After I deposited my check and kept a little cash for my wallet, I drove the long way around town to give her at least a few extra minutes before going home. She didn't seem to notice at all, and once on the highway she seemed to get quiet again.

"You ok?" I asked.

Lacey looked over at me. "Yeah, I guess. Just a weird weekend, that's all."

"Well, when are your parents going to be back?"

She smirked. "Not till Monday morning."

My eyes widened. "Your kidding. You think your friend will be home soon?"

"No," she said. "They were going out for some show. A play or something. I was trying to get there before they left so I could go with, but my stupid bike quit."

I really didn't know what to say. It should be none of my business if she stays home alone or not, she surely seemed old enough. But something made me not like that idea. Still though, there wasn't much I could do about it. After all, I was just giving this girl a ride. I wasn't some hero destined to rescue her from the dying scooter.

So, to pass the time while we drove, we played a game I made up. We had to spot things as we drove that looked like numbers, and point them out. Anything in nature, but not an actual number such as what would be on a mail box. Her first pick was a number seven, found within a tree. I found a two, in a cloud. It wasn't much fun, but it passed the time and Lacey seemed to appreciate it.

Of all the encounters a person can have in there lives, especially the ones that happen by chance, it's always a surprise to find out just how close you always were after all. When Lacey told me to slow down because her house was coming up, it was only about five miles down the highway from my apartment. Such a small world, I thought. She'd been so close, and not once had I ever noticed a junky white scooter driving down the highway.

There were two houses very close to each other, separated only by a line of mid-

sized pine trees. Lacey's house was the first house of those two, and no other homes were visible from there. It was a nice area, like my own. Quiet, peaceful. And most importantly, in my opinion, private.

The house was a gray two story monster with a large balcony on the second floor, and a porch right in front. It seemed to have just about everything, including the look of money. It also seemed to be recently built, even the unpainted wood that made up the porch looked fresh.

I pulled up to the garage and killed the engine. Lacey and I exchanged glances, and then got out to retrieve her scooter.

"You know what's wrong with it?" I asked her, as I lowered it from the tailgate.

"Gas."

"Yeah, it's leaking," I said. "I can still smell it."

I pushed the scooter up to the garage and parked it just to the side of it so that it wouldn't be in the way when her parents returned. As soon as I stopped, Lacey opened a compartment on the side and pulled out a small purse made of jean type material. She shuffled around in it.

"You want me to take a look at it?" I asked, hoping she would say no.

"What, the bike? No. I put the last of the gas in it this morning, anyway."

I just nodded. "Ok, well, I guess I'll be seeing you then."

She looked up and smiled. "Thanks for the ride. And the sandwich."

It was awkward. It was as if there was more I felt I needed to say, or *wanted* to say, but couldn't find the words. Yet, I didn't know what it might be that I wanted to say. So I just said, "It was nice to meet ya, you know."

Lacey walked over to me, stood on her tip toes, and pecked me on the cheek.

"You're a sweet guy," she said. "I'm glad I ran out of gas."

Not knowing exactly how to take that, or perhaps just reading more into it than I should, I simply smiled and squeezed her arm. "Take care. I'm sure I'll see ya around."

Lacey watched me as I climbed into my truck and started it up twice. As I was backing out, she walked up to her front door and continued digging through her small purse.

The driveway was long and narrow and close to the pine trees, so I drove slow.

Stopping at the highway, I saw Lacey standing at her front door, and although she was facing it, she wasn't going inside.

I backed out onto the highway, and put the truck into drive.

Lacey spun around on the porch, threw down her purse, and sat down on the porch steps. She rested her chin on her hands and watched as I started to roll away. She didn't look happy, but from the distance, it was a little hard to tell. Still, I had a pretty good idea why she hadn't gone inside.

In my rear view mirror I saw a car coming up behind me. There was still quite some distance between myself and the other car, but now was the time to get going. I pushed on the gas, but kept my eye on Lacey. She was looking up at me as I drove off.

There wasn't anything else I could do, I reminded myself. She could surely find a way inside by herself. It was her own home, after all. Besides, sweet as she was, this wasn't my problem. I couldn't spend all of my time escorting a kid around. I enjoyed her company while it lasted, but there had to be an end as well.

She watched me as I picked up speed and was nearly out of site. I hadn't realized it, but I was barely looking at the road. I was watching *her*. Just before I passed another line of trees and our view was cut off, she put her head down. I'm not sure what thought was going through my head at the time, but I know it wasn't the one I wanted to do. Or maybe it was. At that moment, I wasn't sure of anything. All I knew was that the *end*, wasn't now. Instead of continuing on, I hit the brakes, moved to the side of the road, and let the car behind me pass. Then, I flew in reverse back to her driveway.

When she saw me, she stood up. When I pulled into her driveway, she started walking in my direction. And when I stopped and rolled down my window, she was smiling again and ran to me.

"Need a ride?"

"When don't I?" she said sweetly.

"Only place is my place," I told her.

"Perfect." Lacey ran back to the porch, retrieved her purse, and jogged back to the truck.