

A Nine and the Six

By GL4Ever

Chapter One

My father told me once, when I was a little boy, that the world usually doesn't see a person for who they are. He said that we are all numbers in the system, shuffling about within the given space we are provided, forever being changed and adjusted until we all fit into someone else's idea of the perfect ordering system. He told me, that for all their efforts, those who created the order would never truly succeed.

I was ten when he had said those words to me. I hadn't a clue what the hell he was talking about. At that age, I was more interested in fishing and throwing rocks at road signs than I was about the meaning of life. It took another ten years, shortly after his death, to grasp the idea of what he had said. And another six years to see that I was living it in the most unusual way.

Little did I know it at the time, my life was about to change. At the time on that Friday morning, I would have been certain that my run-in with the stranger was nothing more than an unusual beginning to another typical day. It didn't exactly turn out that way. In fact, my life was never to be the same.

I awoke to June's sunshine beaming through my apartment window. My *only* window, not including the smoked glass window in the bathroom that couldn't be opened without a hammer. My apartment was small, more of the studio type. Bedroom and living room were one, and only a small area was set aside for what was supposed to be a kitchen. Somehow, the builders had forgotten that a kitchen table might be needed, and instead chose to focus on making the bathroom twice as large as it needed to be. As a result, my landlady allowed me to install a jacuzzi in agreement that it stays should I move out due to having to have the floor strengthened, and a cable TV hookup.

After changing into comfortable jeans and a black t-shirt, I shoved my wallet into my pocket and grabbed my keys. It was payday and it was also my day off, so I intended to cash my check, spend some money, and kick back at home with a few movies for the night. It wasn't as if there was anything else to do.

The nearest town was small and quiet and I lived about twenty minutes outside of it. No movie theaters, no local hangouts, and my pickup wasn't exactly the type of ride I'd want to be seen cruising the streets in. Just like town, it was old and uninteresting.

My apartment wasn't really anymore than attic space that had been converted into what now supposed to be livable conditions. In exception to the only luxury I'd ever purchased for myself, the jacuzzi, it was nothing special. But it was home. Underneath me lived Mrs. Caran, my landlady and owner of the house, and as I opened my apartment door to the outside's fresh air, I saw that she had stuck a small blue envelope onto my door with yellow tape.

I had been convinced for quite some time that the woman, as sweet as she was, was completely color blind. The envelope had on it my name, Kyle, written in her handwriting.

I stood just outside my door at the foot of the steps and looked out toward the driveway. Mrs. Caran wasn't home, her Buick no longer beside my truck, so I opened the envelope and read the purple paper as I walked down the steps.

"Shit," I said as I reached the bottom. "You've got to be kidding me."

I looked around the yard, spying, as if I thought it was some sort of joke. Yet I knew better. It's times like this when you feel as if your control in the world is slipping away. It is, until you take a moment to soak the news in and think of solutions. In my case, I had to find a new place to live by the end of the month. First, it felt like a joke. Then a conspiracy. Then, which was about four seconds after I had finished reading and crunched the purple paper up in my fist, I knew I simply had to start looking for a new apartment.

Instead of throwing something through Mrs. Caran's kitchen window, the thought which took place during second four, I headed to my truck, tossed the paper onto the passenger's seat, and started it up. After allowing it to die once, which was tradition, I started it again, turned it around, and headed out to the highway.

Where the hell was I going to find another apartment? Although I didn't like the idea of living within the town, I would if I had to. But there simply wasn't much of a chance of finding something within my price range in the next twenty six days, and I

clearly knew it. There were other nearby towns, only one of which I was familiar with and I had a feeling one of them would ultimately be where I would end up.

I decided that while I was in town this morning, I would grab a newspaper and pray for some luck. It was just as my mind began imagining myself opening that paper and scanning the classifieds that I saw, in the real world, what would eventually change everything.

The vision of the newspaper disappeared.

She was leaning against the seat of a dirty white scooter at the side of the road. Both the girl and the scooter were leaning against each other, as if without the other, they'd both fall to the ground.

At first glance, it appeared as if she were just taking a rest. She made no attempt to stop me, and didn't immediately look up as I approached. But I slowed, and as I passed, I saw the dark wetness of a gas leak in the gravel, directly under the tiny engine.

She looked right at me, and our eyes met for an instant. Then, she was behind me and growing slowly smaller in the mirror. Although at the time I hadn't noticed, there was something in her eyes that spoke to me. It told me something about her that I couldn't place. Something that was buried deeper than even the eyes could explain.

Perhaps that was the reason for going against my rule of not stopping for someone at the side of the road. Everyone had a cell phone these days, except me. And someone else was likely to come along soon. Or perhaps it was because she was young, maybe twelve or thirteen at the most, shouldn't be left in the middle of nowhere. Or maybe it was something in those eyes.

Whatever the reason, I had already convinced myself that the highway was too quiet and deserted. It was hard to tell how long it would be before someone who could help would come along. By the time I had thought out all of the reasons a young girl like herself shouldn't sit alone at the side of the road, and added the reminder that it was another ten miles before the next house, I was already in reverse and moving closer toward her.

She didn't move. Even as I edged the truck to the side of the road and came to a stop, she didn't look up. For a minute, I just sat there, watching her in my rearview mirror. Strange. All I could think was 'strange'.

The girl just sat there in her black stockings and even blacker short skirt, legs parted as she leaned against the unfaithful scooter. She had her arms spread out, one hand holding the center of the handle bars, the other gripping the tail light. But it was the tight camouflage shirt that made her slenderness stand out and I wondered if she was younger than I had originally thought.

For a moment, I thought about leaving. What was the use of offering help to someone not respectful enough to acknowledge it? I wasn't exactly a patient person, and I tended to have a temper when it came to people with no respect. But as a last attempt, I leaned over and rolled down the passenger window.

"Anything I can do?" I yelled.

I glimpsed movement from the corner of my eye and I leaned up to see her step away from the scooter. It fell straight over to the ground and if I didn't know better, there was a tiny grin on her face.

She walked slowly, almost *too* casually, up to the open window and rested her arms on the door. Resting her chin on her arms, she finally looked up at me with big green eyes.

Blowing a strand of her shoulder length brown hair out of her face, she looked as relaxed as if she were sitting at home on a sofa with nothing to do. "You weird?" she said.

"Weird?"

She nodded without lifting her chin from her arms. "Yep, weird. Like...toss me in the back, chains in the basement. Weird."

I grinned, but I wasn't really amused. "No, not weird. I just wanted to see if you needed any help."

The girl shrugged. "Do you wanna' help?"

I sighed. "I've got to get some things done in town. I can give you a ride, call someone to come and get you, whatever you want. It's up to you."

"Five, four, six, one," she said. "Tell them to get me?"

I nodded. "Sure thing. Soon as I get in town."

The girl stepped away from my truck and watched me as I started to roll up the window. But then she jumped forward and put her hands on the glass.

“Hold it,” she said.

I waited for her to continue, but kept my hand on the handle to the window.

“I’ll take the ride,” she said, “if we can put my bike in the back here.”

“You sure?”

The girl nodded and gave me a little grin. “You can’t be too much of a creep if you were just gonna’ drive off.”

I smiled at her, and this time it was genuine. I took my hand off of the handle and sat up. “Testing me, huh? Pretty smart.”

She shrugged, and turned away. “I try,” she said as she headed back to her scooter.

As I opened my door, I truly realized her point. She *was* smart and had played me pretty well. I hadn’t really thought much about the reasons why someone like her might be concerned, until now. I decided to give the kid a little credit. Perhaps she wasn’t so disrespectful after all.

She stood there at her scooter, holding it up again, and waited for me to help her load it into my truck.