

A Nine and the Six

By GL4Ever

Chapter Three

I had felt sorry for her. That was what I was telling myself while we talked during the ride to my apartment. And my lie wasn't without its truth. Lacey *was* stuck in a situation. Locked out of her house; her friend gone until tomorrow. It was something worth a certain amount of pity, but not to the extent I was allowing it to. I was allowing it to become the *reason*, but somehow I knew it wasn't.

The true reason I hadn't simply continued driving was something I didn't yet understand. There were no feelings that had words to explain them and there was no logic other than the lie to myself. A part of me wanted her company for a little longer, there was no denying that. But I didn't know why.

Lacey sat up in the seat as I stopped at the mailbox and retrieved my mail and eyed the house. "I thought you lived in an apartment."

I pointed through the window to the top of the house and the steps that led to the door. "Up there. It's more like a converted attic."

Lacey was intrigued, but said nothing more as I drove up the driveway and parked my truck beside Mrs. Caran's car. Her car was in good shape, but an older model. It had the typical silver painting with a black canvas top. And because it had two very wide doors, I had to park a good distance away. I'd learned that lesson the first time Mrs. Caran opened her door and got my truck's ugly tan paint on the edge of her door.

Lacey followed me through the yard swinging her bag so that it grazed the grass and eyed the house. Though she was slightly behind me, I could see her from the corner of my eye and couldn't help but notice the way she walked. It was as if she felt free, almost at ease, no matter where she was. For a girl who seemed as cautious as she had on the side of the road, she showed no signs of concern now.

Just as my foot reached the first step, Mrs. Caran stepped out of the house and called my name.

Lacey stopped beside me and said, "Hi, Mrs. Landlord!"

I glanced over at her, half grinned, and rolled my eyes.

“Hello,” I called back. “I got your note.”

“Come here, will you?” she said, motioning for us to go to her. “I can barely see you from way over there.”

Lacey and I walked over to her where she stood on her small porch. “Don’t worry about it,” I said. “I’ll find another place.”

Adjusting the leaves on one of her hanging flowers, she said, “It’s just a shame. I was going to talk to you about it much sooner than this, I assure you. But you know how it is. Things just slip my mind sometimes.”

I smiled at her. “Like I said, it’s not a problem. Do you mind if I ask why?”

Mrs. Caran genuinely looked surprised. “Oh dear, didn’t I tell you? I wrote it all down for you.”

“I don’t think so,” I told her. “I just remember that you said you wouldn’t be able to rent the apartment to me after the first of the month. Maybe I just forgot.”

I hadn’t forgotten. Even Lacey shot me a quick glance as I said that since she had read the note too. But she must have understood my reason for saying that because she said nothing. Mrs. Caran was old, but sweet. It never hurt to remind them that not all forgetfulness was their fault.

Mrs. Caran thought for a moment. “Well, no worries. I can tell you now. I’m moving, you see? My daughter lives in Louisiana, as you know. And this old place, it’s just getting to be too much for me. And you know how I am in the winters here. The dear invited me to come and live with her and I just couldn’t say no.”

I was truly happy for her. From the stories I had been forced to listen to during the past year, I had learned that Mrs. Caran and her daughter had something of a rocky relationship. For nearly three years, they hadn’t spoken. It was during one Christmas that the daughter made a call to her mother, eventually patching things up.

“That’s really great,” I told her. “I’ve visited there when I younger, and it’s really nice down there.”

“It sure is,” she agreed. “You remember. You hadn’t been living here very long when I went on vacation. That was the first time I had seen her in God knows how long!”

I nodded and remembered. But if I didn't sneak away soon, Lacey and I would be listening to seventy-two years worth of memories. "Well I wish you the best," I said, starting to back away.

"Oh, no no," she said.

Damn.

"You've forgotten to introduce me to your friend here."

Damn again. I hadn't thought of what to tell her since that big picture window beside her porch allows her to see anyone I happen to bring up to my apartment. I thought quickly.

But not quickly enough. Lacey answered for me. "I'm his niece," she said. "I was here once before, do you remember me?"

Mrs. Caran looked puzzled. "I'm sorry dear, but I don't. But then you know how it is at my age."

"It's ok," Lacey said. "I didn't talk much then."

She looked at me and wrinkled her face in thought. "I don't remember you having any siblings, Kyle."

Lacey glanced at me with a look that said, *You figure this one out!*

"My mother remarried," I said. "About three years ago, actually. So Lacey here is technically my step-niece."

Mrs. Caran excepted that and her wrinkled face change to one of sweet happiness. "Well it's certainly nice to meet you again, sweetie. Did Kyle tell you that I used to be his teacher when he was about your age?"

Lacey nodded. "He sure did," she lied.

"He was such a good student," Mrs. Caran went on. "I think math was his favorite subject, but you'll never get him to admit it."

I decided to make a run for it. I glanced up at my door and said, "I think I hear my phone ringing. I'd better hurry!"

Lacey giggled and waved goodbye to Mrs. Caran. She waved back and told Lacey to come down and say hello sometime. We, however, were storming up the steps to my apartment.

Once inside, Lacey made herself comfortable on my bed in the living room while

I put a few dishes I'd left laying around in the sink, and checked the bathroom to see what else she didn't need to know about me was laying about. Once I was satisfied, I joined her in the living room. Her eyes were wandering around the room, soaking it all in.

"If you'll hop up for a second, I'll turn this back into a couch."

Lacey smiled and stood. "Yeah, you think you're pretty smart, huh?"

"How's that?"

She set her bag on the counter in the kitchen. "There's two of us, and only one place to sleep. It's not like one of us gets to sleep on the couch."

If it hadn't been for the tone of her voice, I might have thought she was being serious. "Well, I thought you could just sleep in the truck," I told her as I pushed the mattress back into the frame of the couch. "I've got an extra blanket somewhere around here."

"You're just too funny," she said, not really meaning it.

I grinned. "I'll take the floor."

"Well, at least I don't see any chains or handcuffs."

I tossed the cushions and pillows back onto the couch. "In the bathroom, bottom drawer."

Lacey walked over to me and punched me in the arm. She sat as I fell into the couch. From the end table which looked more like a nightstand with the alarm clock, box of tissues, and touch lamp sitting there, I retrieved my mail and thumbed through it.

I glanced up as Lacey scooted forward and started looking around. Apparently, she found what she was looking for when she stretched herself across me and grabbed something from the stand. She settled back down beside me and clicked on the television.

Two DVDs, two bills, one life insurance information packet for Mrs. Caran, and five pieces of junk mail for me made up today's mail. I tossed Mrs. Caran's envelope in the trash, as she'd already described to me in perfect detail her life insurance plan, followed by my junk mail.

The movies, I opened and checked for cracks. All too often a movie I had been looking forward to would arrive with a crack so subtle it was nearly unnoticeable. I

would find out later, only after I had prepared myself for a good film and had gotten myself in the mood. Of all the things in the world that could piss me off, that was the most common occurrence. And the most ridiculous.

“Not sure if you’d like these,” I said, after determining the disks were in good shape. “Didn’t really plan on having company this weekend.”

Lacey glanced over at them and read the titles. “Never heard of them. You got cable, that’s good.”

“Satellite. That’s better.”

She smiled and continued flipping through the guide. “You don’t get Sci-Fi.”

“Yeah, it’s in there somewhere,” I said, gazing at her. “You actually like Sci-Fi?”

Lacey nodded. “I can’t find it. But yeah, I like it. It’s better than the stupid reality shows.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

She looked up at me. “Why?” she asked. “You don’t like it?”

I laughed to myself and shook my head. “No, it’s not that. I just thought kids your age loved that reality stuff.”

“Yeah, well we’re not all that stupid.”

We had a laugh together and I helped her find the Sci-Fi channel. After putting my mail on the counter, I grabbed a Pepsi out of the fridge and handed it to Lacey.

The day was growing warmer outside, and I was starting to feel it. I had been beginning to regret not resizing the small window to fit an air conditioner when I had the jacuzzi installed. On a normal day, I’d strip down to my shorts and simply open the window. However, I didn’t feel Lacey would appreciate watching me prance around in my underwear. To spare her the misery, I put a fan in the window and turned it on. In a few hours, even that wouldn’t be enough to cool the small apartment so I’d have to offer her my sympathies and then slowly burn to death.

Lacey seemed completely at ease. She sipped her soda, commented on the special effects when it was obvious the five-hundred foot robotic killer wasn’t real, and laughed each time someone tripped and fell trying to run away from it. She was good company and even more amusing than the show.

Lacey had, during the course of the movie, taken each commercial break to find a

new comfortable spot on the couch. This time, with a yawn, she stuck a pillow at the far end of the couch and laid on her back, resting her feet on my belly. For a moment, I thought about tickling her. But as I looked down at her feet, clearly visible through the stretched black tights, I found myself motionless as a thought hit me.

She was eleven years old. I shouldn't be playing with her, I should be watching over her. I knew something felt wrong, but I couldn't place it. It was almost as if I felt guilty for thinking about tickling her. As crazy as it sounded, and as normal as tickling might be, it seemed to give me a feeling of both pleasure and guilt.

There wasn't anything particularly special about her feet. I mean, they were feet, after all. How special could they be? Nevertheless, my hand stayed where it was on the arm of the couch, held back by a thought that lasted less than a second yet filled my head with confusion.

"They stink?"

I glanced over at her. "What?"

"You're staring at my feet," she said. "Do they stick or something?"

I realized I was holding my breath. "No, I guess I was just lost in thought."

Lacey grinned. "You're spacin' out."

I chuckled, leaned my head back, and closed my eyes.

I listened to the giant robot step on civilians and shoot every building in sight, but I was thinking about those feet on my belly and the girl they were attached to. I felt those feet, even though we were so still it was more a memory of when they touched me. I tried to figure out why she seemed so relaxed, but more importantly why I felt so relaxed. Most kids I'd been around were annoying. Why was she so different?

Another commercial, and I almost welcomed Lacey's shift in position. But this time it didn't come. Stealing a peek, I saw that she was sleeping. I closed my eyes again, and smiled to myself.

Lime green.

Lacey may have been almost a complete stranger, but somehow I felt like I knew her. Like I was closer to her than I should be. Without thinking, I rested my arm on her legs letting my hand hang over near her ankle.

Lime green.

The black tights she wore seemed to cling to my arm, holding it in place. It was only then that I was slightly aware I had placed my arm on her legs, but I made no attempt to move. I was comfortable, Lacey was napping, and although the robot was making it's fatal last stand against the tiny humans, I heard none of it.

The last thing that ran through my head before I dozed off was Lacey's lime green toe nails.

It was the heat that woke me. Not the usual sticky wet heat that is normal for this area due to the nearby lake, but a dry heat. The fan wasn't doing much good.

I opened my eyes, stretched without really moving, and yawned. Lacey was still sleeping, but she had moved a bit. Now she lay, rather unladylike, on her side with one foot on my lap and the other shoved behind my back. A little more than an hour had passed but it felt like most of the day was gone.

The sound from the TV was still on, but now it was more noise than anything else. My head still had yet to clear and my eyes felt tired and dry. I found the remote tucked under Lacey's waist, pulled it out, and shut off the TV.

After slipping out from under Lacey's foot, I sipped some Pepsi and then splashed some water on my face in the bathroom. It felt good, refreshing. Especially since it was cold water.

When winter was over but it was still cold outside, I had learned that every time I filled the Jacuzzi with hot water and kicked on the jets, it heated the entire apartment. When summer came, I got desperate one day and tried filling it with cold water. It wasn't an air conditioner, but it did cool the apartment enough to be comfortable.

I let the cold water run and returned to the living room to remove the fan from the window. Keeping the window closed and placing the fan near the Jacuzzi helped cool the place even more.

Lacey stretched out on the couch and opened her eyes. She scanned the room and smiled when she found me. "How long was I asleep?"

"About an hour," I said, sitting on the edge of the couch. "I'm trying to get it

cooled off in here.”

She rubbed her eyes, sat up, and massaged her head with her fingers. “It’s a little hot, yeah.”

I let her get woken up while I waited for the water to fill. Once I kicked on the jets, she got up and stood at the doorway to see what the noise was. Her eyes widened and she scrunched her mouth. “Too cool!”

I grinned. “Not what you’d expect to find in this little place, huh?”

Lacey shook her head. “Nope, but we’re going swimming tonight!”

I laughed, and then it actually hit me what she said. *Shit.*

“Feel like going for a walk?” I asked without thinking.

Lacey shrugged her shoulders. “Sure. I need the bathroom first though.”

“Oh,” I said, assuming she was still at the doorway because of the Jacuzzi.

“Yeah, sure. Turn the water and stuff off while you’re in there.”

I left her alone in the bathroom while I grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and set it on the counter. I figured since I’d opened my mouth without thinking, I’d just take her through some of the trails in the woods out back. I hoped she would enjoy the walk and the quiet. The trees provided enough shade to stay cool, but I always tended to take a water bottle with me whenever I followed the trails to the lake.

When Lacey came out of the bathroom her hair had been brushed through and it fell gently against her cheeks. It was as smooth and shiny as if she’d just washed it. Tucking one side of her hair behind her ear, she took a long drink of her Pepsi. “You want to go for a walk?”

“Yeah, unless you don’t want to,” I said.

Lacey joined me at the door. “Sounds fun,” she said, casually.

I felt relieved. My mind was completely blank when I tried to think of what I would do to entertain her if we remained in my apartment. Not to mention that sudden feeling to break into a run at the thought of sharing the Jacuzzi with her.

With the water bottle stuffed in my back pocket, Lacey followed me outside and around to the back of the house. One wouldn’t notice from the front, but the back yard was nearly a perfect square and spacious enough to look bare with only one umbrella covered swing sitting near a small fire pit. We walked through the yard and to the edge

of the trees where an opening began revealing itself.

“And this is where I should panic,” Lacey joked.

“No one can hear you scream,” I played along.

Lacey made a strange sound behind me, something between a laugh and a snort.

“Who says I’d scream?”

I slowed until she was walking at my side. “What’s up with you?” I asked, seriously. “I don’t get it.”

Lacey didn’t look at me. Instead, she stared down at her feet as we followed the trail further into the woods. “I don’t know,” I heard her say, softly. “Sorry.”

I put my hand on her shoulder while we walked. “You don’t have to be sorry. It doesn’t bother me. I just don’t get it.”

I felt her shrug. “I guess I just like joking around, ya know?”

“Yeah. But there are other ways, too.”

“Does it make you nervous or something? Cause I’m just playing.”

I gave her shoulder a squeeze and took a minute to think by taking a drink of the water. Finally, after Lacey has some as well, I stuffed it back into my pocket. “I think it’s more because we just met than anything else. I can see you joking around like that with your friends but with someone like me, I just don’t understand it.”

We reached a place where the trail forked off in a few different directions. Two of the paths would take us to the lake, but only one of them would lead us to a small clearing at the lake’s edge where few people were ever found. Those who didn’t know of this private spot would only find it otherwise by wandering through the forest, which was technically part of the state wildlife preserve, or by a small boat. This was the path we took.

“You know where you’re going?” Lacey asked, glancing behind us.

I nodded, though she didn’t see. “Yeah. I come out here every once in a while.”

“So what’s out here?”

“You’ll see.”

Lacey started to say something, but quickly stopped.

I knew the reason. It was some joke, some funny comment that I’d now made her feel uncomfortable saying. Without really having to think about it, I realized that it was

just in her nature to be a little wise ass. Especially when it made someone else smile. There wasn't anything more than innocent humor intended and I felt guilty for making her feel she had to suppress it. I gripped her arm gently and turned her around to face me. "You can say anything, ok?"

Standing there, facing each other, I put my arms on her shoulders. Lacey looked up at me and instantly I saw the uncertainty in her eyes. "What do you mean?"

"The way you joke around. You just be you, ok? Don't worry about it."

She nodded, but still seemed unsure. "Ok."

I gave her shoulders a little squeeze and we were on our way. There was still a good amount of walking to do before we reached the lake and I was beginning to wonder if I had made a mistake. I'd never paid attention to the distance before because I had always been lost in thought as I walked. Now, however, Lacey kept me attentive and more aware of my surroundings. It seemed as if we should be there already, but there was still one more split in the path we had to reach.

"Ya know," Lacey said after a few minutes. "I just sort of feel comfortable around you. Or something like that."

"Well that's good to know," I told her.

"Seriously," she insisted, starting to talk with her hands. "I don't know why, it's weird. But I can't just be me around my parents. Not even Ashley. That's my friend, ya know? The one who wasn't home. Well, maybe around her a little bit. But it's not the same. I guess I don't really care if she likes me or not."

It took me a minute to put it together. "Well you don't have to worry about whether I like you or not. I do."

I noticed her smile as I glanced over. She sighed, and continued. "Good. I like you too. You're kind of cool."

"I've got to admit though," I said, "you're a mystery. I'm still trying to figure you out."

She laughed, then tried to trip me. "A mystery," she said, under her breath. "How rude."

"A good kind of mystery."

"Uh huh," she giggled. "Sure."

“Well, you’re brave,” I told her. “You’re probably too smart for your own good. And you seem to be enjoying spending the day with a guy twice your age. I can’t think of another kid I’ve met that’s anything like you.”

“So you know a lot of kids?”

She caught me. “No, not really.”

“Ok,” she said, as if she were going to finally come clean. “Let’s just say that I don’t care, ok?”

“About what?”

“Anything,” she said. “Just anything. I mean, I do care about stuff. But, I just don’t care about being a kid.”

“So you just want to experience life?” I was reaching.

“Yeah!” she said. “Exactly. I just want to do stuff without everybody like...oh, she’s just a kid, she can’t do that!”

“Ok,” I told her. “I think I get it.”

“Bout time,” she joked. “Which way?”

We were at the point where the path split into two directions, and I pointed across her to the left. “Not much further.”

“You’re still gonna’ carry me back,” she said.

“Deal.” Although, I wasn’t quite sure about that one.

When we finally reached the opening in the trees fifteen minutes later, Lacey stopped at the edge and stared. I could tell by the look on her face she liked what she saw.

The clearing was no more than two hundred yard wide, and about a hundred feet between the trees and the water. But it was more than enough space to enjoy the view and feel secure with the privacy it offered. The lake was long, and oddly shaped. Here and there, if looking from a map, the lake seemed to have bumps along one of its arches. This natural clearing was along one of those arches so there was a nice view of the water ahead, but off to the sides where the public gathered at the parks and recreation centers we were out of view.

Lacey followed me to the sand and watched as someone on a jet ski bounced along the water in the distance. “This is so cool!”

“I like coming here,” I said. “It’s really nice at night when the moon is out.”

Not long ago, when everything wasn’t frozen solid to the ground, I had moved some logs from the tree-line over near the water so that I could lay in the sand and rest my back on the logs. Now, Lacey sat on one and started to remove her shoes.

“Is this yours?” she asked.

I sat beside her. “No. Part of the woods belongs to Mrs. Caran, but the rest belongs to the state. It’s a part of one of the parks out there.”

“So who made the trails?”

I shrugged. I hadn’t ever really thought about it. “I don’t know. Hunters maybe, but then I don’t know if hunting is allowed out here. Animals, I suppose.”

“Well this is cool,” she said, standing. “I’m gonna’ wade in the water, wanna’ come?”

“Nah, you go ahead. Just be careful.”

For a moment, my heart stopped, as Lacey appeared to be removing her skirt. But instead she had simply pulled it up while getting a grip on her tights. She slid them off of her, and gently rolled them down her legs. Once she had stepped out of them, she tossed them at me and walked out to the water.

I had been making a point not to watch her too closely, as she may have sensed it. But now, as she stepped into the water, I rolled a portion of her tights through my fingers and watched her fight the initial cold of the water. She glanced back at me, fists clenched, and smiled.

The water was always cold this time of year. It wouldn’t be until mid July that it felt noticeably warmer. Lacey appeared to be having fun walking around in the water, kicking out a little and making splashes. I started to regret having worn jeans.

Again, I made a point not to watch her too closely. Every now and then she glanced over at me, and I didn’t want to appear fixated on her each time she did. It was rather hard to accomplish. I felt strange knowing that she may look over at any moment and find me fondling her tights. The trees didn’t help much either as one could only look at a selection of trees for so long. Finally, I rested her tights on my leg and picked up a small stick to mess with. It wasn’t as if I couldn’t still watch her.

She seemed to move with a graceful flow, the way she stepped forward, the way

she'd hold her arms out for balance. Yet, she also seemed clumsy and unsure of her next move. She was natural. It was the only way I could describe it. She wasn't trying to move in a way that her body or personality didn't agree with. She wasn't trying to be someone she wasn't. She was just being herself, natural, and it showed in every way.

It was more attractive to me than the beautiful girls I've seen who've tailored their bodies and actions to that in which they think a man wants. Lacey, was natural. And as the thought ran through my mind, I realized that I was seeing her in a way I hadn't expected.

Instantly, there was a warm rush that ran through my body. Yet, I felt a quick chill, and couldn't tell which it was. I looked up at Lacey, the focus of that feeling of wrongness, and had to look away. Unintentionally, an image of Cathy entered my mind. *That* was what I found attractive. It was what every man should find attractive. Not an eleven year old girl wading innocently in the water. I tried to shake off the feeling, and the thought, and think of other things.

But Lacey didn't make it easy. She made a loud splash with her foot and had turned to face me. "Hey," she said, making sure she had my attention.

I could already see her, but I went through the motions of looking up and taking notice.

"Ya know what?" she asked. "I can't swim."

"You're kidding, right?"

She shook her head. "I never had a chance to learn."

"What kid who lives by a lake doesn't have the time to learn?"

"Me," she said, grinning.

I guess it was a smile that went across my face, but I can't be sure exactly what it was. I was surprised to hear that she couldn't swim, but amused at her lack of concern. I supposed it gave me all that more reason to watch her more closely.

Lacey spun around and stopped quickly, which made a splash, and then spun around again. After a minute, she started wading deeper into the water. Until now, she hadn't let the water reach her knees. But now it was already over her knees and inching closer to her short skirt.

"Don't get too deep, ok?"

“I won’t,” she called back.

When the water reached the bottom of her skirt she hiked it up a few inches more and walked around for a few more minutes. Just as I was starting to get nervous, she began heading back, making faces at me until she was finally out of the water and on the sand. She stood in front of me and let the water drip into the sand.

“I’m wet,” she said, as if she’d just noticed.

I grinned, ran my hand along her leg, and flicked water up at her. “Yeah, I’d say you’re wet.”

After getting me back, she started looking around until she found a clean patch of grass off to my right by the trees. She snatched up her tights and shoes. “Be right back.”

I knew she had to clean the sand off her feet, so I didn’t pay much attention to her while she did that. Then again, I didn’t try *not* to pay attention to her either. I was simply waiting, so it was a bit of a shock when, after she had cleaned her feet, she dropped the skirt to the ground and stepped out of it.

Fortunately she had been turned away from me so there was no way for her to know that I had caught that glimpse. I wasn’t sure if she’d turned away on purpose because she knew I would see her, or because she had been facing that direction when she walked over there and hadn’t bothered to turn around. It didn’t matter much. What did matter was that I was still watching her.

Lacey picked up her skirt, and started wringing it out, lifting one foot at a time to let the water rinse more of the sand off. Once she was satisfied, she gave it one more good twist, and then set it on the ground. It took a minute for her to untangle her tights and roll them up and I realized that I was still watching her, absorbing every detail about her.

Despite her age, and despite the fact that she looked rather flat in her clothes, it was clear that wasn’t the case. She had shape. Noticeable shape and curve, something I wouldn’t expect in a kid her age. Her skin was as smooth as any I’ve ever seen and nothing about her nakedness seemed childish. Although, she was clearly not an adult but I couldn’t place exactly what made that apparent. There was something about her that sparked my need to look.

Perhaps it was the newness of the situation. It was different, *she* was different.

Different in what I expected a kid her age to be like, and different in appearance as well. I realized that I couldn't take my eyes off of her, and for a moment I didn't care. But when she started to put her right foot into her tights and roll it up her leg, I started to come out of my trance.

As her left foot slid into the tights, I took a deep breath in and continued to watch only until she was pulling them all the way on. Once she slid the tights over her rear, I finally found the strength to look away.

But the image of her standing there, nearly nude, stayed in my head. I tried to push it away, but it refused to go. Even when Lacey spoke, I barely heard her. It was as if I had been introduced to a drug that I'd never experienced before, unable to anticipate its affect on me and unable to control that affect.

"You hear me?"

I continued looking in the other direction, but finally was able to loosen my grip on my thoughts. "Sorry, what?"

"I asked if you have a dryer at your apartment."

"Um," I nearly turned toward her. "No, but I use Mrs. Caran's. I've got a key to the utility room."

"Ok," she said, and I realized she was standing right next to me. I turned around, assuming she had dressed, but found her holding her skirt in her hand. Her tights covered her well enough, but as I turned toward her my first thought was how they fit so snug against her. Stretching in just the right places, and how the wetness of her skin seemed to absorb the material until it was nothing more than a darkness to her skin.

I stood up quick, but had absolutely nothing to say. My heart was pounding.

"You ok?"

I nodded. "Yep. You ready?"

Lacey smiled uncertainly, but said that she was ready.

Stumbling around like a fool, I tried to get my water bottle out of my pocket, but it wasn't there. I nearly tripped on the logs trying to find it and nearly stepped on the bottle once I had spotted it. Finally, I retrieved it, blew the sand off of it, and took a very long drink.

"That felt good," Lacey said as we entered the woods.

“Yeah, I bet.” I was beginning to regain my composure by refusing to think about what had just taken place. “Next time I might join you.”

“Teach me how to swim?”

I smiled and looked over at her. “Sure,” I said proudly. “I’m sure you’d get the hang of it real quick.”

“Well,” she said softly. “If there *is* a next time.”

“Why wouldn’t there be?”

“It depends on if you want me around or not.”

I was a little shocked, but more saddened that she’d even question it. Although I found myself even more surprised at my strong my certainties were in my answer. “Of course I want you around. You’re welcome here anytime you want.”

She livened up. Her big green eyes brightened and a smile crossed her face. “Really?”

“Absolutely.”

Lacey said nothing more but her walk quickened and sometimes she’d run ahead of me and pull leaves off branches. I fought the urge to notice how her tights, when damp, did little to hide what was underneath. But I failed.

And while I had more time to think and less time to be locked in a panic, I saw just how twisted the entire thing was. It saddened me to think that I was even capable of noticing any amount of attractiveness in Lacey. She wasn’t supposed to be attractive, she was supposed to be a kid. I was supposed to be an adult, and think and act like one. I decided to blame it on being a man. Told myself that any real attraction would be acted upon and that what I had felt was nothing more than shock.

I didn’t buy it. Even then, I knew better. But it was better trying to believe in a lie than admitting to a truth I still knew nothing about. At least that was what I thought at the time.

By the time we had reached the first split in the path, Lacey had joined me at my side put her arm around my hip. It was as if she was officially claiming the person who had just made themselves known as her friend. It was true and it felt nice.

I put my arm around her as well and held on to her thin waist while we walked the rest of the way through the woods. She seemed to welcome the contact even more than I

did. She snuggled against me as we walked, sometimes playfully pushing me toward a tree or trying to tickle my side. I gave her the same playfulness right back and before I knew it we were at the edge of the woods staring at Mrs. Caran's house.

"Better put those back on till we get into the apartment."

Lacey looked down at her tights and how much they could be seen through. Although they had completely dried, it was clear they were more than see-through in the areas that stretched. "Yeah, guess so."

While she was stepping into the skirt, she asked, "Is that what freaked you out?"

I knew what she was talking about, and so did she. There was no trying to get around it. "Maybe a little. Just surprised me, that's all."

She adjusted the skirt around her waist and we walked together toward the house. "Well, let me know if it bothers you."

"It doesn't," I said, a little too quickly. She hadn't finished.

"Well, my parents always said that they didn't want me to be afraid of my body, ya know?"

I nodded.

"I remember they told me how they used to go to some kind of nudist place when they met. I thought it was kind of weird, but then it started making sense. They never would let me go though."

"They still go?" I asked.

"No. I've never seen them go. It was probably before I was born and maybe when I was real little."

"So you're not self conscious, or anything like that?" I asked.

"Well, yeah," she admitted. "I am a little. I guess it just depends. I'm not going to freak out or anything, but I'm not gonna' show off either."

"Ok," I said, truly impressed. "I get it. And it's no problem."

I certainly couldn't say that I was as comfortable with myself as Lacey was. It was rare that I could feel comfortable nude, or even partially nude, around anyone. The only exception was when the lights were turned off and I was wrapping up a date that had gone well. But even that wasn't all that often. When it came to being prepared to take on the world, I was beginning to feel like Lacey had me beat.

Back inside the apartment, Lacey kicked off her shoes and grabbed her bag off of the counter. "I'm going to change," she said. "Can you dry this stuff for me?"

"Yeah, sure."

I tossed the nearly empty water bottle into the sink and sat on the couch while Lacey took her bag into the bathroom. Just a moment later, she called for me and I met her at the door.

She hadn't changed yet, but had stripped off the camo shirt and the tights and skirt. She hung onto the door and leaned around, handing me the clothes. "Thanks. Be right out," she said sweetly.

I grinned. "Be right back."

I took the clothes out to the dryer and threw it all in together. If my mother ever knew this was how I did my laundry, she'd lecture me for a week on the proper way to separate colors and materials. But as far as I was concerned, if it got clean and still fit, that was good enough. I threw in a fabric softener sheet so Lacey might think I had some class, and headed back upstairs.

I found Lacey peeking into my refrigerator in her new dry clothes. It was obvious the moment I saw what she was wearing that it was what she had intended to wear to bed at her friend's house. It was a faded yellow pair of shorts that appeared to be a little too short yet a little too loose, and a cut off white tee-shirt.

She turned and glanced at me as I shut the apartment door. "You caught me."

"I think you've got the right idea," I said. "I'm starving already."

Lacey stood up but held the fridge door open. "Did you ever think of buying food?"

I laughed. "I work around food all day long. The last thing I think about when I leave work is taking some of the food with me."

"I could chew on this piece of frozen chicken," she said, jokingly.

"Not if you want to live."

It didn't get the smile I was hoping for, so I added, "I'll order a pizza. Sound good?"

"Yeah," she said. Then she thought for a moment. "But do they deliver all the way out here?"

“Mrs. Caran’s nephew runs a place in town,” I told her. “I don’t know him, but I just have her order for me. He always comes out for her.”

Lacey smiled. “Perfect.”

I grabbed the phone as she shut the fridge door. “What do you want on it?”

“Anything except onions, mushrooms, little red things or little green things.”

“Thick or thin?” I asked, dialing Mrs. Caran.

“Thickest they got!”

Mrs. Caran seemed amused, as usual, at the pizza request. She easily agreed, and after running the money down to her to pay for it, Lacey and I sat in the swing around back to wait for it.

I was surprised when she pulled her feet up onto the swing and snuggled up against me. With her head, she pushed my arm out of the way and rested her cheek against my chest. As if we were meant to fit together perfectly, my arm fell gently around her and we swung slowly, silently. No words were needed as our comfort said everything that could possibly be said.

It was nearly an hour later when the pizza arrived. I was thankful for the long wait. That time spent in the swing with Lacey was more fulfilling than anything I can remember doing. When I heard the crunch of gravel from the car pulling into the driveway, I glanced down at Lacey. She peeked up at me, grinned, because she was thinking the same thing I was. We didn’t want to move.

But unfortunately, we had to. Once we got moving, our energy returned. Lacey offered Mrs. Caran a piece of pizza, but she turned it down so we carried the box up to my apartment and finished off nearly half of it within ten minutes.

After we declared ourselves stuffed, we played a few card games, one game of Trouble, and Lacey proved to be more competition than anyone I’d played with. Although she didn’t win every game, she tried like hell and made it obvious.

Somehow, the time flew by. It was nearly seven in the evening by the time we had finished playing games and when Lacey noticed the time, she suggested we make the bed out and watch the movies I had got in the mail. She seemed to have completely forgotten about the Jacuzzi and although I knew I wasn’t going to remind her, I realized I had lost the concern about sharing it with her.

With no need for the fan, the window and cooler air outside kept the apartment comfortable. Lacey got the sheet and blanket off of the shelf in the bathroom while I pulled the couch out and locked the mattress into place.

“It’s big enough,” she said, tossing the sheet and blanket onto the foot of the bed.

“For?”

“For both of us,” she said. “I won’t make you sleep on the floor.”

I smiled, but I had already gotten the feeling that sharing the bed wouldn’t be a problem for her. Myself, on the other hand, it was a different story. I had already seen more of Lacey than I had ever intended to. Those images were permanently implanted in my head, and although I was able to pretend they weren’t there, each time I was near her I would remember. It was something I would simply have to get over.

I tossed the blanket on the floor and started to lay out the sheet but Lacey took over. “Go get your PJ’s on,” she said. “Can’t sleep in that can ya?”

“My PJ’s are something you wouldn’t want to sleep with,” I joked.

“Probably same as mine when I’m at home,” she said. “Am I right.”

I shook my head and grinned. “You probably are.”

I chose a simple pair of blue shorts and a white tee-shirt and then joined Lacey who was already in the bed, sheet pulled up just above her knees. I instantly noticed that she hadn’t chosen the edge of the bed, she was closer to the middle.

What’s with this kid? I thought to myself. And although I wasn’t going to complain, I still didn’t understand it. Despite what she said, those were just words. Anyone could say them. It was seeing it right in front of my eyes that told me I was far from understanding what she was all about.

After putting in the DVD, I joined her in the bed and intentionally made no attempt to stay near the edge. I wanted to make a point that I wasn’t put off by her forwardness and that I wasn’t intimidated by an eleven year old. Forwardness to what, I wasn’t sure. I knew it wasn’t any more than friendship, but still I felt as if she somehow expected me to back away at points. Not this time.

Arm to arm, we laid there and watched the first DVD. It was an action film, most of the language was something I thought Lacey didn’t need to hear although she didn’t seem to notice it. The nudity in the film was something I didn’t know was coming as the

review said nothing about it. Again, Lacey didn't seem to notice and I figured that a girl who was as free with herself as she was wouldn't care anyway. After the movie was over, we both agreed that it sucked.

The second film was some type of supernatural horror. We snacked on pizza and Pepsi while we watched the first half of it, but we were starting to grow tired once the movie started making sense. I made myself more comfortable on the bed so that I could fall asleep while watching it and Lacey did the same.

At one point, she jumped when a dead thing came around the corner unexpectedly. She scooted closer to me and I smiled to myself. Some things never change, no matter what age.

By the time the film was over, Lacey was laying on her side facing me and was holding on to my arm. She fell asleep that way, but woke as I was feeling around for the remote. She looked up at me, smiled, and waited for me to switch off the TV.

As soon as I returned the remote to the stand, I assumed I would get my arm back. But instead, Lacey took my other arm and pulled as she rolled over. Facing away from me, she had also pulled me onto my side and wrapped my arm around her. She scooted back, pushing herself into me until I could nearly feel every inch of her from her feet to the top of her head.

I slid my other arm under her head and held her while she dozed off to sleep. I was speechless, yet the last thing I wanted was to talk. All I wanted was to lay there with her and never let go. I closed my eyes and absorbed every aspect of the girl.

As I slowly fell into the night's sleep, I knew clearly how wonderful being with Lacey felt. Yet, as much as I wished the thought would go away, I also knew how frightened I was that I could feel that way.