

# Love at Second Sight

by [Daddycums](#)

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*Note: This story was written for an unofficial contest on XNXX.com ending on 5/1/2010. The first paragraph was written by ejls, and the object of the contest was to write a story based upon it.*

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The light fog added a moisture to the air. The coolness of the night wrapped around her like a wet towel, sending a shiver up her spine. She was lucky she knew the area so well, or she could have easily become lost. She looked through the trees at the house where he lived, slightly smiling at the one electric candle burning in the kitchen window.

She knew she shouldn't be out here in the forest at night; in fact, she probably shouldn't be making this trip at all. Several times she had considered turning back. She could always come later, during the daylight hours.

But no, that wasn't true. Her parents would never give her permission. That was why she had to come at night, when they were in bed and not likely to even know that she was gone. She didn't like sneaking around behind their backs; she was a good girl, one who almost always did what her parents told her to do. She never lied, and probably in the morning she would confess to them what she had done. Naturally they would punish her, but that didn't bother her; she knew the consequences of this visit and was ready to face them.

This wasn't the first time she had visited the cabin. As a self-proclaimed tomboy, she had wandered all over the forest, from the river in the south to the foothills of the mountains in the north, from the lake in the east to the edge of the town in the west. She felt more at home in the woods than in her own bedroom. Her parents were used to her disappearing into the forest for most of the day. At first, they had tried to discourage her with tales of bears and mountain lions and snakes and rushing rivers that snatched little girls from the banks to carry their bodies out to sea and a dozen other assorted bogeymen. But the more they told her of the dangers of the forest, the more exciting it sounded, and in the end they figured it was a losing battle.

She had visited the cabin before, peeked in the windows at the empty rooms inside, climbed around on the rotting woodpile out back, and then grown bored with it. But now it was occupied, and not just by anyone. It belonged to him.

A chill ran through her at that thought, and it might not have had anything to do with the coldness of the night. Just the thought of seeing him again after all these years excited her.

She remembered when he had come to stay with her family, in some kind of foster care arrangement. Her parents were great humanitarians and took in the boy when he had lost his parents. He had been fifteen then, just shy of his sixteenth birthday.

She remembered looking up with wonder and excitement to this older boy who was so handsome and daring and brave and sure of himself. He didn't take orders from anyone; he did what he pleased and it didn't matter what anyone else thought. Plus he could get away with anything. Literally anything. He used to brag about all the things he had done, things that shocked her but at the same time excited her. She had never even thought some of those things were possible. But to a young rebel like him, anything was possible.

She recognized now that part of her image of him was colored by her age and her innocence; she had only been nine years old then, an impressionable little girl drawn to the "bad boy." He was dangerous in the same way that the forest was dangerous, and therefore intriguing.

But there was another side to him too, one that perhaps only she knew about. With her parents, with other kids his age, with almost everyone in the entire world, he was belligerent and haughty and disrespectful. But he had always been gentle and kind to her. She remembered how they used to play together out in the woods, hunting lions and elephants and the occasional dragon. She taught him how to climb trees, and in return, any time they had to ford a stream, he had her hop up on his back so he could carry her across. She remembered those days with great fondness.

It was just too bad that he had to get himself thrown out of the house six months later. That was the last she had seen or heard of him for six years, until her father mentioned a few days ago that he had moved into the old cabin. From the tone of his voice, he made it clear that he didn't approve of having the old rascalion living that close.

Her father hadn't exactly forbidden her from paying the boy a visit, but she suddenly found herself with too much work to do around the house for any decent excursions into the woods. She knew her parents could be stubborn, and if she pressed the point she would only end up grounded. So here she was, approaching the door of the rascal who had been her big brother for a short time, awaiting with trepidation their reunion. Would he blame her for tattling on him and getting him in trouble? Would he slam the door in her face? Would he even open the door at all?

When she reached her destination, she stood in front of that imposing door, staring at it and trying to work up the courage to knock.

Inside the cabin he sat on the couch, thinking about her. He wondered whether she hated him, or if she even remembered him. It had been six years, after all, and she was just a child when he left. Six years was a good portion of her lifetime.

He had to smile as he glanced around the room, thinking about just how different things would be if he hadn't deliberately set out to change his life. It was an admittedly small yet delightfully cozy cabin in the woods, with a kitchen, living room, one bedroom, and one bathroom. Right now the cabin was lit by a single battery-powered candle sitting on the kitchen table. For the moment he had no electricity and no phone service, but that was just temporary; he had only been living in this cabin for a couple of days, and before that it had been vacant for years. Tomorrow he would ride into town and visit both the utility company and the phone company and get everything taken care of.

If his life had continued on the same course as it had six years ago, he might have electricity and the occasional use of a phone, but they would be accompanied by the cold, gray walls and intimidating bars of a prison cell.

A bookcase full of old textbooks stood against the wall as a monument to what he had achieved in those six years. It was no grand feat worthy of remembrance; he was hardly the first person to graduate from college. Still, it was astonishing considering where he had started from, in the lowly halls of a juvenile detention center.

Next to the door, his bicycle leaned against the wall, another symbol of the change he had made to his life. Six years ago he had sworn off all of the toxic substances that he had been slowly poisoning himself with, and made a commitment to a more healthy lifestyle. Now instead of spending his leisure time drinking or smoking, he rode several miles every day to keep himself fit. He did it now out of choice, but soon it would

be out of necessity. The nearby town was almost four miles away, and in the fall he would be starting on his Master's program at the university there. Lacking a car, he would have to ride his bike to school every morning.

He could have chosen an apartment in town, but he enjoyed the solitude and tranquility of the forest. Besides, it meant he was closer to her.

Perhaps it was destiny that had brought him back here. He had applied at several schools around the country, and the one that had accepted him just happened to be only a couple of miles from the home of the girl who had had such a profound influence on him.

He wasn't sure whether he even believed in destiny. Surely no supernatural powers had given him anything lately; he had had to work hard for everything he owned, everything he knew, everything he was.

But whether or not there was fate or destiny involved, there was inspiration.

He retrieved his wallet from his back pocket and opened it, gazing down at the picture of her smiling face. She had long, straight blond hair, large brown eyes full of childlike wonder and curiosity, and a smile that could cheer up the darkest heart. It was hard to believe that this little girl, this nine-year-old tomboy who loved frogs and snakes and climbing trees and wading in the stream, could change a man's life for the better. She probably didn't even know the influence she had had on him.

He wanted to tell her. Perhaps one day he would work up the courage to cycle over to the house where he had lived for six months. Her parents might not be so happy to see him; he had betrayed their trust when he had lived with them. But if they would just give him a chance, he would show them that he was changed, that he was not the boy they knew, the boy who had seemed determined to destroy himself and drag everyone around him down into the abyss with him.

Truthfully, he was frightened, and not just of them. He was afraid of what their daughter might think of him. He didn't know if he could handle it if she hated him.

One day, he decided. One day he would work up the courage to find out. But it wouldn't be today.

A sudden chill ran through him. It was getting cold, and if the clouds he had spotted just before dusk were any indication, it would probably rain tonight. Fortunately, he had a fireplace in the cabin and plenty of wood out back. He had procrastinated going out and bringing the wood in, but with the temperature dropping he could no longer afford to wait. He set his wallet down on the nearby table, then rose to his feet and headed for the door, opening it and staring with surprise at the girl standing there behind it. It was her.

She looked as startled as he did; no doubt she had been just about to knock when he opened the door prematurely.

Rosy-cheeked from the cold, with long blond hair matted and stringy from the damp air, and sporting dozens of dirt stains on her worn and faded clothes, there was no mistaking the little tomboy girl that he had just been thinking about. But she was not so little anymore; the childlike cuteness that he remembered so well had had time to age and mature, and although she still had a lot of growing up to do, she was already a stunning beauty.

He couldn't help but smile, both at the coincidental timing of her arrival and at her appearance. In fact, he began to chuckle.

"Kelly Whitaker," he said. "Somehow I knew that the first time I saw you again, you would be soggy, dirty,

and half frozen. You were never happy otherwise."

Kelly smiled now too. "So you remember me, Brandon," she said.

"How could I forget?" he asked. "You're the one who taught me how to catch frogs, climb trees, and find wild berries to eat to keep up my strength for hunting lions."

Her smile widened at that. Suddenly, she threw her arms around his neck and hugged him. At that moment, the six years of separation vanished and it was like they had never been apart.

Memories returned of holding her just like this, and Brandon Lang felt, for the first time in years, content. So the little girl didn't hate him after all. That had been his greatest fear since he left; they had departed on less than happy terms. Of course, children that age tended to forgive easily, but there was no telling what her father or mother had put into her mind.

"Well, come on in," he told her cheerfully as soon as they pulled apart. "I know a little cold weather never bothered you, but you're letting all the warm air out of my house."

"Hey!" she playfully exclaimed, but she seemed happy enough to come inside. He watched her as she strode past him, her dirt-stained clothes reminding him so much of when she had been a child, always running around outside in the forest, never a care in the world for what she looked like or who saw her in her messy, untidy state. Some things never changed.

And some things did. Her hair was longer; she had grown it out, and despite its stringy and damp appearance, it really looked lovely. Her face still retained a bit of that childlike quality to it, but age had improved upon it; now she was a beautiful, and perhaps even sexy, adolescent. That was particularly emphasized by her figure, which had done plenty of filling out in the time since he had last seen her. She was slender yet sported some really nice curves for her age.

This became all the more apparent when she removed her coat. Yes, she had definitely grown up quite a bit in the past six years. She handed her coat to him, and he hung it up in the closet.

"Well, sit down," he offered cheerfully, motioning to the couch. She took a seat, and he sat in the nearby comfy chair. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but I'm guessing your parents don't know you're here," he said.

Kelly grinned, all the confession he needed from her.

"Well, I won't tell them if you won't," he smiled, and she laughed.

For a moment he just stared at her, intrigued both by her presence here and just how much she had changed. He had always wondered what she would look like the next time he saw her. In truth, he hadn't really expected her to be so pretty. It was a strange feeling to see this beautiful young woman before him and at the same time remember the little girl that she once was.

"God, it's good to see you," he said. "I was just thinking that I ought to head over to your place and visit with your family."

"That might not be such a good idea," she replied.

"Are your parents still mad at me?"

"Not really; it's just that they don't trust you."

"I suppose I deserve that. I wasn't exactly the most trustworthy person back then. But apparently you don't mind me so much."

She laughed. "They don't know you the way I know you."

"True enough. They never went tromping through the mud on the river bank or climbed trees with us or chased foxes or grew tadpoles into frogs in a jar."

"Yeah," she said. "I had almost forgotten how much fun we used to have."

"That's for sure. I'll tell you a secret. That was the best time of my entire life."

Kelly sighed. "Then I had to go and spoil it," she mumbled.

"As I recall, *I* was the one to spoil it," he replied. "Besides, it turned out all right in the end."

"It did?" she asked.

"Are you ready for a shock?" he grinned.

"What kind of shock?"

"You're looking at a college graduate," he smiled.

"No way!" exclaimed Kelly.

"It's true. I cleaned up my life, went to college, graduated with a degree in Biology, and in the fall I'm about to start work on my Master's. I bought this house out in the woods because I expect the program to involve a lot of hands-on experience. I can walk out my front door and be surrounded by all the biology I could possibly hope for."

Kelly laughed. "You're amazing," she said. "The last time I saw you, you were... well..."

"A juvenile delinquent?" he offered with a grin.

"Yeah. That's it. So how did you manage to go from juvenile delinquent to college graduate?"

"Honestly, I couldn't have done it without you," he replied.

She stared at him. Brandon continued to smile, hoping it came across as affable and friendly. He had waited a long time to tell her how he felt about her; he had rehearsed the lines over and over again in his mind in the off-chance that he would see her again. Yet now that she sat here before him, he couldn't quite get them out.

"Hold that thought," he told her instead. "It's getting kind of cold, and I need to go collect wood for the fire. In the mean time, make yourself comfortable. I'll be back in a couple of minutes." He stood and strode to the bookcase, picking up the flashlight that sat on top. Then he moved to the door. Opening it, he turned and flashed her one last smile, then disappeared out into the darkness, closing the door behind him.

Kelly stared at the door where he had just stood, thinking about everything he had told her. She had to admit that she had not expected the change that had come over him. Here he was, a clean-cut, handsome man with a

bright future and a confident outlook on life. She had expected something different, something less. Perhaps a bit of the bad boy that she remembered. That image of him had been attractive because it was dangerous, but now it seemed weak and even silly in comparison to what he had become. That confident man was even more attractive.

She spied his wallet on the table. Curiosity had always been her weakness, so she reached out and plucked it from where it sat. Then she opened it, glancing at the pictures in it. There were three. The first was of Brandon and what were probably several of his friends at some kind of party. The second was of her family, taken in front of their house on a warm and bright summer day. She smiled as she spied herself in the photo, perched on top of Brandon's shoulders. How young and tiny she looked!

Then she flipped over to the reverse side and saw a picture of just herself alone. It must have also been taken when he was living with them. She smiled as she gazed at it, flattered that he had kept a picture of her in his wallet this whole time. He had said something about how he couldn't have done it without her. What did he mean by that?

Just then, the front door opened, and Brandon walked in, carrying an armful of wood. Kelly jumped, feeling guilty about looking through his personal belongings. She set the wallet back down on the table.

"Sorry," she apologized. "I just got curious."

"It's all right," he told her. "It's not like I have any secrets from you. You were there for two out of those three pictures after all."

Since he didn't seem to mind, she had a few things to ask him. She just wasn't sure how to say it. "So why... um..." she started.

"Why do I have a picture of you?" he completed the question for her. She nodded.

Brandon deposited the wood on the floor next to the fireplace. He didn't answer the question, but instead set about building a fire. She watched him, wondering if he were trying to think of what to tell her. His task gave him plenty of opportunity to think it over, and she didn't want to push him. She waited patiently until the small sparks gradually built up to a healthy blaze.

Only then did Brandon sit down on the couch next to her. He kept a respectful distance, which made her wonder if there was a reason for that.

"Kelly," he told her, "I never got a chance to tell you what you've meant to me," he began.

"Me?" she asked, surprised.

"Yes, you. I wanted to send you a letter, but I didn't know what to write. Even now it's hard for me to express what I really want to say. I hope you won't take this the wrong way; I hope you're able to understand my meaning despite the awkwardness of my words. You've been the most important influence on my life since I left your family."

"I don't understand," she said, which was certainly the truth. "You were only with us for a few months, and I was only nine years old. Sure, I liked to play with you, but I was just a kid."

"I know, and that's the strangest part about it. Or maybe not so strange. Maybe that was *why* you had such an influence on me. You see, until I came to stay with your family, I had been surrounded by people that... well, let's just say I never really had a good role model. I never knew there were good or honest people out there. If

you remember, I wasn't exactly a good or honest person myself."

"I remember that," she smiled. "That's what made you so fascinating to me. You did all kinds of naughty things and got away with it." She wasn't sure whether it was a good idea to admit that, but since he was being so truthful with her, she felt she could do the same.

"I *usually* got away with it," he qualified. "Except once. Do you remember why I had to leave?"

She remembered that only too well. "It was my fault," she said, lowering her gaze.

"No it wasn't," he insisted. "Kelly, I want you to get that out of your head right now. Whatever part you played in it, it was my decision, not yours, that got me into trouble."

"But I shouldn't have said anything to Mom and Dad. If I hadn't, you would never have had to go away."

"Look, you caught me smoking a joint. What were you supposed to do? I put you in an awkward position where you had to make a decision. And I'm glad you made the right one."

"But Mom and Dad--"

"Yes, I think we both remember how furious they were. And rightfully so. I mean, your mom has a heart of gold; that's why she took me in in the first place. She thought she could turn my life around. And your dad supported her in this, and tried his hardest to make me into something I wasn't. And I threw it all in their faces. You were right to tell them."

"So you don't hate me for it?"

"Hate you? Is that what you've thought for these six years?"

Kelly nodded.

"I should have told you how I really feel. You shouldn't have had to carry that guilt with you all this time. Kelly, I don't want you to ever lie for me. You did the right thing, and I not only respect you for it, I'm glad you did it."

"Even though Mom and Dad sent you away?"

"It would have happened eventually anyway. It was inevitable that they would have one day caught me doing something that offended their morality. I was never destined to be a part of your family forever. But if you believe in destiny, and I'm really starting to consider it, then I think you were my guardian angel."

"What do you mean?" she asked, surprised.

"You were who you were, and never tried to be anything else. You were kind of a tomboy, and from what I've seen, you still are. You were always more at home in the forest than at school, church, or anywhere else. But the great part was that you were honest about it. I loved it when we used to go out into the woods to play. I never realized until then that a person could have so much fun doing something that didn't require sneaking around behind someone's back. And I never realized until then that a sixteen-year-old boy could be friends with a nine-year-old girl. I never had a little sister before, but that was what you were to me. For a few months, I actually stopped thinking about myself for a change and started thinking about someone else. I guess you could say that you were my first true friend."

Kelly beamed at that. She wasn't sure whether he hadn't meant it to be a compliment, but to her it was.

"When you told your parents on me, at first I was angry," he continued. "Their reaction was as bad as I expected. They told me I could no longer live with them. Or especially with you. I guess they didn't want me to be a bad influence on you. But what they didn't understand was how good of an influence *you* had been on *me*. Here was this little girl, so innocent and trusting, so believing in honesty and truthfulness, that she was willing to do the right thing no matter what it cost her. I couldn't believe anyone could be so honest, and yet, there you were, right in front of me.

"It's no exaggeration to say that you changed my life. I hated what I had become, especially now that I saw someone so completely different and so much happier. I wanted what you had."

"What did I have?"

"Self-respect. I couldn't respect myself the way you could. I wanted to be able to hold my head up high and say that I mattered, that I was important, that the world was a little better because I was in it. But I couldn't. Not yet."

"It's too bad Mom and Dad sent you away."

"I kind of wish they hadn't, but on the other hand, I think it was necessary. I don't think I could have found my path if I had stayed with you and your family. I needed to really understand the consequences of my actions, to feel real loss because of a mistake I made. With all due respect to your parents' good intentions, I didn't need someone to protect me from myself; I needed to hurt. It was the only way."

"And so that's why you have my picture in your wallet?" asked Kelly. "As a kind of inspiration or something?"

"Exactly. I needed to have you close by, in a sense, to keep me on track. Whenever I had a tough decision to make, I could just open up my wallet and see your smiling face, and realize that I was working for something, that there was a reason why I was doing what I was doing. So because of you, I gave up drinking, smoking, drugs... hell, I even gave up swearing," he joked.

Kelly laughed. "Oh did you now?" she asked.

"Okay, maybe I make exceptions on special occasions," he admitted.

Kelly stared at him for a minute, a minute in which they just gazed into each other's eyes. She could feel the sincerity of his words, and understood now what he meant. It was surprising, shocking even, but not an unpleasant revelation. It excited her to know that this handsome and confident man not only loved her, and had loved her ever since they had parted six years before. She could feel her heart beating rapidly in her chest as she gazed at him.

"Wow," she said finally. "I never knew I had such an influence on you."

"I should have told you."

"Yes you should have," she smiled. Then she scooted in closer to him, reached out, and wrapped her arms around his neck. He slipped his arms around her back and embraced her tightly.

They held each other there for the longest time, just relaxing in each other's embrace. Kelly thought about all he had said. Gone was the bad boy of their childhood. Here was a man, a strong and confident and quite



handsome man, who loved her. Yes, it was clear that he loved her, perhaps not in any romantic way but a pure and platonic love. And as she thought back on the fun times they had as children and the man he had become, she wondered if perhaps she loved him too.

She felt him shift his position, drawing back a little. Then she felt his lips on her cheek.

Kelly immediately pulled back, surprised. Brandon wore a similar look on his face, as if he had surprised even himself with that gesture. Or was it so bad? It wasn't the first time he had kissed her like that, after all. It was okay to be affectionate with a child, and perhaps that was how he still thought of her; as a little nine-year-old girl. She only knew he loved her; she didn't know *how* he loved her. Perhaps it was nothing more than a brother's love for a sister. Or perhaps...

"Brandon," she said, "Look, I..."

"You don't have to say anything. I stepped over the boundaries, and I apologize."

"No, it's okay. You just startled me. I really didn't mind."

"Really?" he asked. It sounded almost pleading, like he was asking permission.

*Permission to do what?* she wondered. *What are his real intentions toward me?* He had pretty much admitted that he had been a little infatuated with her, but then again, the last time they had been together, she had been a little infatuated with him. Was there something more now, something that neither of them were willing to admit?

It made her feel a little uncomfortable. She didn't think he would ever do anything to her against her will, but for a moment she realized just how alone they were out here. Just how well did she really know him, after all?

"I should go," she said.

"Of course," he nodded. "Let me get your coat." He went to the closet and retrieved it, then held it out to her.

"If my parents find out I snuck out, I'll probably be grounded for a while," she laughed as she put it on. "So if I don't come visiting you for a few days, you'll know why. But I'll call you tomorrow."

"Unfortunately, I don't have the phone service hooked up out here yet," he replied. "And I don't have a cell phone. But I'd love it if you'd stop by again. Tell your parents that I'm not such a villain after all. I'd like to see them too."

"I'm sure they'll be happy to see you," she smiled. Brandon accompanied her to the door and opened it.

They both stared out into the downpour, surprised to see it raining so hard. They had been so engrossed in their conversation that they hadn't even heard the rain start. Now, as she stood there in the doorway, Kelly realized just how foolish she had been.

"How... how far is it back to your house?" asked Brandon.

"About a mile, through the woods," she replied. "Closer to three by the road."

"No phone, no car, not even electricity," he said. "I can't call your parents to come pick you up, I can't drive you home, and I'm not going to throw you out in this weather."

"Maybe it will stop," said Kelly.

"Maybe," he replied, but it didn't sound like he had much hope of that.

They backed away from the door, and Brandon closed it behind them. Kelly once more returned to her seat on the couch, but this time Brandon sat in the nearby chair. No doubt what had happened earlier bothered him as much as it bothered her.

But did she really mind? She wasn't certain of anything right now. When he kissed her, it brought back memories of her childhood, when he had always been so gentle and kind with her, so protective and perhaps even a little possessive. In fact, the only reason it bothered her was because it caught her off guard. She hadn't expected it right then, but now...

Now, she realized, if he wanted to do it again, she would let him. It felt wonderful to relive the past like that, but there was perhaps something more. He was a handsome man, made even more so by his confidence and strength of character. Perhaps she was even a little attracted to him.

She caught herself staring at him, and immediately turned away. Instead, she let her gaze drift to the fire burning in the fireplace, watching its hypnotic dance. Silence filled the cabin, but not the awkward silence of a lull in the conversation. This was a peaceful, relaxing, and comfortable silence.

The warmth radiating from the fireplace and the flickering light soon took their toll on her, and she felt herself growing drowsy. Her eyelids grew heavy as she stared, and the weariness of her travels weighed down on her shoulders. She felt a slight dizzying sensation as she began to tip over, her sleepiness causing her to drop off.

Then suddenly, he was there again, right beside her, his arm wrapped around her. She smiled and lay her head against his chest, throwing her own arms around him and hugging him tightly. In a flash, everything was clear. No, not everything, she realized. Kelly still didn't know what his feelings were toward her, but she knew quite clearly what her feelings were toward him.

Brandon was taken aback by her gesture. He had noticed her starting to tip over and realized she would hit the hard wooden arm of the couch, so he had quickly slipped to her side to keep her upright. Then she had thrown her arms around him, which admittedly felt very nice, but he sensed something more than mere friendship in that embrace. He couldn't deny a certain attraction toward her; she had literally startled him with her beauty when she showed up on his doorstep earlier in the evening. He wasn't the type of man to favor young teenage girls like that, but his fond memories of her, his infatuation bordering on adoration, her lovely face, and her appealing trim figure combined to make her something more to him than just a pretty girl. He had called her his guardian angel, and that was exactly how he saw her. An angel.

She lifted her gaze and stared into his eyes, a half-smile on her lips. Like this, with her face so near, her beauty seemed to magnify a hundredfold. He trembled, but whether that was out of nervousness, shyness, or desire, he did not know. He only knew that he was in danger of falling in love with this young girl.

*How did it come to this?* he wondered. But he already knew the answer; he had allowed himself to worship her for six years without thinking through what his feelings would be if and when he met her again. When she was just a picture in his wallet, a picture of a child even, there was no harm in loving her. But now here she was, flesh and blood, a beautiful young woman right here in his arms.

If there was any doubt as to her feelings toward him, she put them to rest by raising her head from his chest

and planting a brief kiss on his lips.

*What are you doing?* he thought, but somehow he couldn't quite speak the words. Instead, he continued to gaze at her as she drew back and stared into his eyes for any sign of acceptance or rejection.

He should have pushed her away. He should have moved to the chair across the room. He should have done something, *anything* to let her know that this wasn't what he wanted.

But that would have been a lie. She had surprised him with that kiss, but even more surprising was the fact that he liked it. It was like tearing down the barriers between them, not just the barrier of their six years apart, but the barriers of formality, propriety, and most importantly, the shell of lies that everyone wraps themselves in. They both wanted that kiss, and Kelly, being the more honest of the two, was the first to admit it.

Now he had a choice. There were rules, and Brandon had spent the last six years learning to follow them. He had never denied that there was still a part of the bad boy left in him, but in learning to follow the rules he had learned to tame that bad boy, to lock him in a cage where he belonged, and even to tone him down somewhat. How many times had he shut him away in the face of temptation? How many more times would he do so? If there was one thing Brandon knew, it was how to control his wilder side.

But there was one problem, one possibility that he had never considered, and right now that possibility had just become reality. Whenever he was faced with temptation, Brandon had simply opened his wallet and stared at the face of the little girl to remind himself of what he was fighting for. Now his inspiration, his muse, his very guardian angel, was the one tempting him.

Summoning all of his willpower, he placed his hand on the girl's shoulders and looked her in the eyes with a serious expression. "Kelly," he told her firmly.

"Yes?" she asked sweetly with a smile on her face.

Brandon sighed. "Oh, I'm going to hell for this," he mumbled, then leaned in and kissed her again.

This time it wasn't just a quick peck. His lips lingered, caught up in the delightful feel and taste of her. It had been a long time since he had had the pleasure of a girl's lips. That was one of the things he had sworn off in his quest for self-improvement. He had had his share of fun in his wilder days, but once he realized that there were consequences to his actions, he had decided that he wouldn't leave a string of fatherless children behind for the sake of his own self-gratification. He always knew that one day he would find a woman to love, but he would wait until he was ready to make a lifelong commitment. Now he felt guilty for throwing it away for a moment of pleasure.

But it didn't have to go that far. Even as he kissed her, he tried to be rational about the situation. He was already stepping over the line, but at least he would maintain some degree of self-control. A little kissing, a little hugging, even some cuddling, all that was fine. That would probably be enough to satisfy Kelly; no doubt she just wanted to feel romantic tonight, and after what he had told her, it was no wonder.

*What was I thinking?* he marveled. How could he have just blurted out six years' worth of emotions, of admiration and even adoration for her? What did he expect would happen?

But he would be strong for her sake. Let her have her moment of fun. Let her know that he cared for her, that he missed her, that he loved her. They would snuggle for a bit and then the storm would be over and he would walk her home. All that was reasonably safe, though not exactly innocent. Brandon would remain firm, resisting the temptation to take it beyond that. That much, at least, he could do.

Kelly drew back and gazed into his eyes with a smile. "Do you... do you want to go into the bedroom?" she asked.

Brandon nodded. *So much for being strong*, he thought as he scooped her up into his arms and carried her through the bedroom door. Kelly giggled as she kicked off her dirt-stained tennis shoes in the doorway.

Even as he laid her gently on the bed, he wondered what had come over him. Was it as simple as six years of repressed lust? Was his worshipful adoration for the girl clouding his judgment? Or was it something more profound?

*I'll only take this as far as she wants*, he decided. *I'll let her take the lead*. But even as he thought it, he realized it was just one more line that he was drawing, and so far he had crossed every single one.

Kelly grabbed him around the neck as he began to straighten back up after depositing her on the bed, preventing him from doing so. She pulled him back down to her and kissed him passionately. He ended up halfway on top of her, pressed to her by her tight embrace. She was certainly enthusiastic, but then, she had always been persistent when she wanted something. He remembered how she used to sit still for hours on the bank of a river waiting for a frog to peek above the water just so she could catch it. And if she decided that a certain tree looked fun to climb, she wouldn't give up until she reached the highest branches. Now she had set her sights on him, and he was as powerless as that frog or that tree to resist her.

He managed to come up for air just long enough to climb the rest of the way onto the bed, lying down beside her, then she attacked him with her lips again. From the way she bathed his faces with kisses, it was clear that she wouldn't be content with just a little snuggling. She confirmed that a moment later by reaching for the bottom of his shirt.

"Wait," he said suddenly, pushing her gently away and sitting up. Kelly continued to recline on the bed, her head resting on her fist propped up on her elbow.

"Look," said Brandon, "I need to think about this for a minute. I mean..."

"We both want this," Kelly told him. "You've been in love with the little girl in the picture for six years, and I've been in love with the bad boy that I remember from when I was a kid. Now you've turned out to be even better than in my memories, and from the way you've been looking at me all evening, I can tell that you think I have too."

"Okay, I'll admit that you've turned into a very attractive girl. And yes, darn it, I do love you. It's just that... You know what? I'm an idiot. The girl of my dreams is offering herself to me and I'm second-guessing it? If this is really what you want..."

"It is."

"Then let's enjoy ourselves," he smiled, pulling his shirt over his head and discarding it on the floor. Kelly grinned, sitting up and running her hands over his chest. Now *that* felt nice! With that soft and gentle yet almost ticklish sensation, the last traces of reluctance faded away. He knew he would have given in anyway, so he might as well have fun with it.

He reached for her own shirt, but she swatted his hand, surprising him. But then she said, "lie down," and he knew she had something else in mind. He let himself fall back on the bed, and Kelly straddled him, sitting on his thighs and pressing against his rapidly-hardening cock. She gave him a wink, then gripped the bottom of her shirt and with one smooth motion slipped it over her head.

Brandon grinned at the sight of her body. She had the most beautiful, youthful skin, with an obvious tan line on her arms and around her neck from her many excursions into the woods. The rest of her skin was fair, with a healthy glow to it. She was a little thin, but not any more than the typical fifteen-year-old, and her curves were developing nicely. Of course, the curves that most intrigued him right now were on her upper chest, still hidden by her bra. Those curves, both of them, looked to be quite developed already, though she still had plenty of growing up to do.

She saw where his eyes rested, and giggled. "You like what you see?" she asked playfully.

"I do. And I'd love to see more."

"I'll bet you would. I can tell there's still a bit of that bad boy to you."

"I told you already, you bring out the best in me," he grinned.

"Well let's see if I can bring out even more of him." She reached behind her back. Brandon's eyes grew wide as he realized what she was doing. It had been far too long since he had seen a naked girl; he had even tried to avoid magazines and unsavory web sites, despite what some of the other boys in Juvenile Hall had managed to sneak in on occasion. He found himself actually shivering with anticipation.

Time seemed to slow down for the half a second as Kelly brought her arms forward. As the motion began, he realized both that the moment of anticipation had just about arrived, and that it still lay in the future. He felt himself concentrating, measuring the infinitesimal atoms of time during that motion, watching the cups loosen against her chest, exposing more and more, until the moment, like the first rays of sun on a cloudless morning, that the edge of the dark circles appeared. Then suddenly, time returned to its normal rhythm and he found himself staring at Kelly's completely nude chest.

"Oh my god," he breathed, a chill running down his spine. It wasn't the first time he had seen a pair of breasts, but it had been so long that he felt like a virgin. It might as well have been a completely new experience for him.

He was on the verge of hyperventilating at this point, so he took a few slow breaths to calm himself. At the same time, he was far too excited to just lie there, so he reached out and ran his hands over Kelly's chest like she had done to him a minute ago. Of course, this was completely different, considering that she had a lot more for him to play with.

Kelly closed her eyes and smiled, obviously enjoying his attentions. Fortunately, he had not forgotten *everything*; he still remembered a few things about giving pleasure to a woman. He let his fingers trace around her nipples for a while, then squeezed them gently between his thumb and forefinger. Some girls liked it more rough, but he was always very gentle the first time until he got to know just sensitive she was. He wanted this to be as special for her as it was for him.

After several minutes of him playing with her like that, she moved his hands to the side, and lay down on top of him, pressing her chest against his. Brandon sighed, remembering now just how good a girl's body felt. He could definitely get used to this. He wrapped his arms around her and held her tightly to him as she kissed him passionately. Even just that much was incredibly exciting for him, but he knew that there was still more to come, and a certain part of his anatomy was getting rather impatient. It didn't help that Kelly was grinding her pelvis against his, despite both of them still completely dressed below the waist.

She let go of him with one of her arms and reached down between them, fumbling with his belt while still kissing him. Her plan didn't work, so she had to resort to sitting up in order to loosen his belt, not that Brandon minded one bit; he enjoyed the view. It also gave him a chance to go for the belt of her jeans as well.

In the end, she had to climb off of him and sit on the bed to pull down her pants, while he lifted his hips to get his off as well. Since she was already mostly off of the bed already, she stood up and dropped her panties, then stood in front of him, giving him a great view of her naked body. (Or almost naked; she still wore her socks) She has a beautiful young pussy, hidden by a surprisingly thick bush for her age. Her legs were shapely and well-defined from long hours of hiking in the forest, wading in the stream, and climbing trees. There was the expected tan line halfway between her thighs and her knees; she had apparently never outgrown the stage of wearing shorts whenever possible.

"What do you think?" she asked, doing a little pirouette in front of him to show off her body from all sides.

"You truly are my guardian angel, because right now I'm in heaven," he grinned.

Kelly laughed. "Now it's your turn," she said. "May I do the honors?"

"Absolutely!" he exclaimed with undisguised enthusiasm.

Kelly didn't go for it right away, but instead sat back down on the bed and pulled off her socks. Then she turned around and knelt beside him, staring down with glee at his briefs and what lay in store for her underneath. Brandon found himself staring right back at her. For some reason, he found the sight of her kneeling there surprisingly erotic. There was something particularly feminine and even dainty about that pose, despite the fact that the tomboyish Kelly Whitaker was the least dainty girl he knew.

She leaned over him and reached out to stroke his cock through his underwear. He let out a groan at the touch, a groan both of pleasure and frustration. Even without his pants on, it still felt mighty cramped inside his briefs.

Kelly must have picked up on that frustration, because a moment later, she reached inside and fished out his cock, wrapping her hands around it and staring at it with a gleeful smile on her face.

"That has got to be the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," she breathed. "I'll bet you were very popular with all those coeds at the college you went to."

Brandon laughed. "You want to know something funny?" he asked. "I haven't been with a woman since I gave up my wicked ways and went straight."

"Really?" she said with a look of delight in her eyes. "Here I was worried that I wouldn't measure up to your expectations, but as it turns out, maybe I can teach you a thing or two. The innocent little angel corrupting the bad boy." She broke out into a fit of laughter at that.

Brandon laughed too, despite being a little shocked. He didn't know how he felt about that. On the one hand, it did mar his image of her a little bit, though not much. On the other hand, he was kind of relieved that he wouldn't be under pressure to make everything absolutely perfect for her first time.

"So I take it..." he began, but didn't have the nerve to finish the question.

"I'm not a virgin," she said. "But I'm not exactly the most experienced either. I had a boyfriend last year and we messed around some, but it was only a few times and I broke up with him almost a year ago. That doesn't bother you, does it?"

"Let's just put it this way. I kind of feel protective of you, and maybe even a little possessive. If I had found out about it while it was going on, I might have had words with your boyfriend. And by words, I mean fists. But what's done is done, and I'm just happy that you're here with me tonight."

"Me too," she said, leaning down and giving him another peck on the lips. Then she sat back up and finished removing his underwear. While she was down there, she pulled off his socks too, leaving him as naked as she was.

She reached for his cock again, grabbing it and slowly pumping it up and down. Brandon loved the sensation, and was eager to return the favor. He slipped his hand between Kelly's legs, not surprised to feel moisture there. She spread her knees apart to open herself a little more to him, and he took full advantage of it. He let his fingers run all over her pussy, massaging the outer lips and especially searching for that little button at the top of the slit. It might have been a long time since he had done this, but he hadn't lost all his knowledge of a woman's anatomy.

She sighed and closed her eyes as he fingered her, obviously enjoying the attention. He loved the feel of her, the way she was slowly loosening up and growing more damp. The last time he had done this, he was more selfish, more interested in his own pleasure than in the girl's. He could be excused for that; he had been a teenager and a rather wild kid. Now he discovered that there was something even more fulfilling about focusing on Kelly's pleasure. He wanted to make her feel good.

With that in mind, he decided to try something that had never done before. When he was young, it was just a little fingering and then on to the main course. But now he realized that there was so much more that he could do for her.

"Lie down," he told her. Kelly released his cock, to his disappointment, but nothing could be done about that. She lay back on the bed, spreading her knees wide in anticipation of what he was about to do to her.

Brandon started by kissing her lips, spending plenty of time there without touching any part of the rest of her body. It was intimate and sweet, and very fun, but he could tell from the tiny, almost imperceptible motions of her body that she wanted more. He was more than happy to give her what she wanted. He drew back from her lips, then kissed her on the chin. Then he moved down to the underside of her chin, and she pushed her head back to open herself up to him better. Brandon took the hint and pressed his lips to her neck, taking time to kiss her all over, including her shoulders and down to her collar bone. He had a lot of fun running his tongue along it to that dimple below her neck where the two sides met. She giggled as he licked her, partially from the sexy playfulness of the gesture but mostly from the sensual stimulation.

He could have spent hours just licking her around there, but he was only a few inches away from a much more fun part of her body. *Two* much more fun parts of her anatomy, actually.

Without his tongue even leaving her skin, he made his way to the swell of her nearest breast. Her boobs weren't particularly big to begin with, and lying back like this tended to flatten them out, so there wasn't much of a swell at all, but it was still plenty for him to have his fun. As his tongue inched closer to her nipple, he reached out with his other hand and grasped her other breast with it.

Kelly gasped as he massaged and kneaded her gently, while at the same time his tongue traced around the other nipple. She groaned and arched her back, her body beginning to lose control. Brandon smiled, loving the fact that he was giving her that much pleasure. He continued to lick her for the longest time, hearing her breathing grow heavier, punctuated by the occasional sigh or even whimper. Again, he could have been content remaining where he was, licking and fondling her beautiful young tits, for hours. But he also wanted to take the pleasure up another notch. So ignoring her groan of protest, he left her boobs and began to kiss his way slowly down her body. He knew that groan didn't really mean she didn't want him to continue; it was just a natural and reflexive reaction to the diminishing of the pleasure. No doubt she knew exactly where he was headed.

Six years ago, the thought of what he was about to do might have disgusted him. He didn't mind a girl giving *him* that kind of pleasure, but he had never reciprocated. But this time, focusing on Kelly rather than himself,

he found himself wanting to do it. There was no disgust whatsoever.

He kissed down past her rib cage, then on to her stomach, which caused her to jump and giggle. Now he remembered that she had always been ticklish there. For a moment, the devilish bad boy resurfaced, and he removed his hand from her breast to dig his fingers into her side.

Her shriek followed by a burst of laughter was very satisfying.

"You're a meanie!" she accused.

"Sorry," he grinned. "I don't know what came over me."

"Don't worry," she said. "I'll have my revenge."

"Ooh, I'm so scared!" he taunted, laughing. But he didn't tickle her again. He did, however, continue to kiss her. Unfortunately, the unexpected tickling had broken the spell, bringing Kelly down from her erotic high momentarily. That meant Brandon had to work harder to lift her back up.

It didn't matter; a couple of minutes kissing her all over her stomach, especially as he started focusing more and more on the lower part, quickly caused her arousal to not just reach its previous point, but surpass it. For a while, he focused on the zone between her navel and her pubic hair, kissing and even licking her there as he listened to her panting and gasping. Then he decided that he had tortured her long enough, and moved on.

He didn't even mind the hair as he kissed his way toward that jewel between her legs. He just relaxed and enjoyed the sight, sound, smell, feel, and taste of her. She was giving off a strong odor, one that he might find a little unpleasant in other circumstances, but right now, knowing that it was from her arousal, it drove him wild with lust. Then when he reached his destination and let his tongue brush against her lips, he found that he loved the taste of her.

He had been missing out, he realized. Not only was it so fun to lick her all over there, but the sounds and motions of her pleasure were very entertaining. She squirmed all over the bed, rocking her hips back and forth and sometimes even lifting them completely off the bed. Her hands took on a life of their own, sometimes flailing about above her head and sometimes gripping the bedsheets tightly. Sometimes her knees came together to squeeze his head in an almost crushing grip, sometimes they spread wider almost than he thought possible. Her panting had turned to a series of whines and whimpers with every breath.

Brandon took those noises and actions as a sign that he was doing something right. He parted her lips with his thumbs and thrust his tongue inside, licking all over the soft tissue there. He licked her from the bottom of her slit to the top, and she cried out in ecstasy every time he brushed against her clit. He knew that by this time, she was more than ready for him to enter her, but he was having too much fun to stop, at least for a while. How could he have ever thought that this would be disgusting? He couldn't get enough of this young girl's pussy.

But he had his own needs too. Despite enjoying himself immensely, he felt those needs asserting themselves, focused between his own legs. He needed to do something about that, and soon. Ever since she had let go of him, the physical side of his lust had been building, and now that Kelly was properly warmed up, it was time to do what he had been wanting to do since opening that door tonight and seeing her standing on his doorstep.

Yes, now that he had no more need to deny anything, he realized that he really did want this right from the beginning. He didn't believe in love at first sight, but perhaps this was love at *second* sight.



Brandon lifted his head, causing Kelly to groan in frustration for the second time that night. He gazed into her eyes, letting himself get lost in her beautiful and adoring smile.

"I love you, Kelly," he told her, and he meant it.

"I love you too, Brandon," she replied.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"God yes!" she exclaimed.

Brandon rose up from his position between her legs and knelt between them. He leaned over, and, using one hand to prop himself up above her, guided his cock toward her hot and ready opening. Kelly gasped at the first contact, then he pressed forward. She let out a loud wail as he slipped inside her, her pussy gripping his cock in its tight embrace. Brandon was not surprised that she was so tight; she was younger than he had been the last time he had sex, and he had grown quite a bit since then. It just made the feeling all the more pleasurable, for both of them.

He lowered his body on top of hers, slipping his hands under her back to hold her to him. She gripped his shoulders tightly as he began to thrust.

Brandon loved the closeness and intimacy of their bodies pressed together almost as much as he loved the insanely pleasurable sensation on his cock. The softness of her body, the scent of her sweat, the sight of her face so near, the feel of her pounding heartbeat next to his own, and the sound of her heavy breathing all surrounded him, enveloping him in a cloak of arousal. He realized that this was it, this was the moment where his love for the little girl in the photograph was finally fulfilled. He had never consciously thought that it would come to this, though now that he was here, he realized that it was always meant to be this way.

At first he thrust gently, wanting to take it slow and romantic so that she would enjoy it as much as he did. But then she lifted her feet and wrapped her legs around his hips, using them to pull him in even tighter. That suggested she wanted it deeper and harder, and he was more than happy to oblige. He thrust forcefully now, driving himself as deep inside her as he could possibly go. Kelly's moans rose in pitch and volume, a sign that she loved what he was doing to her. She gripped him tightly, her fingernails actually digging into his shoulders so hard that it hurt, but he ignored the pain; the pleasure was so intense that the pain meant nothing.

He felt the passion burning within him, and knew that it was matched by the same within her. They were completely united now, the bad boy and his guardian angel, merging into one being. And yet, even in this immoral and in fact illegal act, he was not acting as the bad boy; she was lifting him to her level. She was rewarding him for coming so far. He realized now that Kelly did not love the boy he had been, but the man that he now was. And in that, he was finding the completion of all his hard work over the past six years.

Even as he pounded into her, she found his lips with her own, and they kissed each other with all of the passion that bound them together. She bit his lower lip, but carefully and gently, not enough to draw blood but just to add one more physical sensation to the already overwhelming stimulation he felt. He got her back by moving his head to the side and nibbling gently on her earlobe. Brandon enjoyed the fact that even as they committed a very much adult act, they could still playfully tease each other like children.

But the best Kelly reserved for the end.

That end was fast approaching. He was beginning the buildup to his climax, and from the sounds she was making, he realized that she was near her own peak. It was only right that they should climax together; they

were two people who were meant for each other, and the whole history of their relationship was about to be culminated in a moment. His hips increased the tempo and depth of his thrusting as they both drew close to their mutual orgasm. He felt the spiking pleasure, driving him to a level that he had all but forgotten since he had sworn off women a long time ago. Now all those memories returned in full force as he experienced it once more.

Just at the fateful moment, Kelly released his shoulder with one of his hands and brought it down to his side where, despite her own climax washing over her, she managed to tickle him mercilessly. Brandon burst out laughing right in the midst of his orgasm, losing all control over himself and spurring his seed deep inside her. Kelly also laughed, and the two of them rode that wave of both pleasure and laughter over the peak and down the other side.

Even as the pleasure waned, the laughter continued, despite the fact that she had tickled him only briefly. Six years of tension, six years of worry about what they thought of each other, six years of lonely separation all vanished in the relief that that laughter brought. It was just perfect; it was just what he needed. In that laughter he found a place where those years of separation didn't exist, where the two of them had grown up together, playing with each other as children and then loving each other as adults. In that laughter, they were not only lovers, but playmates and best friends as well.

But that feeling did not die with the laughter. As Brandon rolled off of Kelly and lay beside her, as she cuddled up to him and lay her head on his chest, as he wrapped his arms around her, he knew that despite how those years had changed them both, it had not changed their relationship at all. Tomorrow they might go out in the forest looking for frogs to catch or trees to climb, just like they had done once upon a time.

"I told you I would get you back," she grinned triumphantly.

"Yes you did. You definitely won that round."

"Oh, there are going to be other rounds?" she asked with a playful smirk.

"A lot of them," he replied.

"I can hardly wait."

The two of them closed their eyes, content now just to hold each other in their arms. Yes, this was the way things were meant to be. Brandon knew now that this was what he had always wanted. No matter what what else he accomplished in life, most of all he wanted to be with his guardian angel.

He fell asleep with a smile on his face.

Kelly awoke in the morning to the smell of breakfast being cooked in the next room. Apparently Brandon was already awake. She yawned, stretched, then gathered up her clothes from the floor.

The battery-powered clock on Brandon's dresser revealed the time as 5:12. That was good; her parents wouldn't wake up for another two hours at least.

She first slipped into the bathroom to take a quick shower; Kelly was certainly not afraid of being dirty, but she hoped to quietly return to her house, slip discreetly back into her room, and pretend none of this had happened. Or if her parents caught her, she could pretend that she had woken to take an early morning walk in the forest. If she arrived home with the smell of sex on her, though, it would be obvious what she had been

doing.

Perhaps it had been a mistake to sleep with Brandon. Perhaps it had been a mistake to even come here. But she just couldn't make herself feel guilty about it. What they had shared was beautiful, and so very very right.

After her shower, she met Brandon in the kitchen, where he was just serving pancakes and bacon onto a couple of plates for them. She noticed with amusement that he had cooked the whole thing on a gas-powered camp stove because there was no electricity. To wash it down he had only bottled water; a lack of electricity meant a refrigerator would do no good. Kelly didn't mind; it was like camping out, an activity of which she was very fond.

"Good morning, sleeping beauty," he smiled. "Hungry?"

"Sure," replied Kelly, sitting down at the table. Brandon passed her one of the plates and handed her a fork.

They ate in silence, not the awkward silence of not knowing what to say but the comfortable silence of not needing to say anything. For now, it was enough to be in each other's presence. Kelly cherished these last few minutes that she had with him; she would have to leave soon if she planned to arrive back home before her parents awoke.

Unfortunately, her plan was doomed to failure. Kelly and Brandon were just finishing their breakfast when they heard the unmistakable sound of a car pulling up to the cabin. Kelly hopped to her feet and dashed to the window to peek out.

"It's my dad!" she exclaimed, then drew back in shock. She stared at Brandon, who stared right back at her. There was no way to hide the fact that she had spent the night here.

"What..." she stammered. "What do we do now?"

"I don't know," he replied, just as shaken up as she was.

"If he finds out what we did--"

"Then I go to prison, if he doesn't kill me first. You're only fifteen years old. That will get me put away for a very long time."

"But it wasn't your fault!" she protested. "I was the one--"

"Don't you dare take the blame for this," he insisted. "I knew what I was doing, and I'm prepared to face the consequences."

"Brandon--"

"Kelly, just hear me out. It's taken me the last six years to learn that I can't run or hide from the consequences of my actions. Sooner or later they catch up to me. I understand that now, and I accept it. I will face your father like a man."

The sharp and heavy knocking at the door at that moment alerted them that they had just run out of time to discuss it further. Brandon took a deep breath, gave Kelly one last smile, then opened the door.

Mr. Whitaker, a short, gray, balding man but no less imposing for his small stature, stood there with an angry glare on his face. A full head shorter than Brandon, framed in the doorway and with that look of anger he still

seemed to tower over him.

Then his eyes fell upon Kelly, standing there beside the table. Immediately he brushed past Brandon without even asking if he could come in.

"What do you think you're doing, young lady?" he demanded.

Kelly decided at that moment that if Brandon could face his fate bravely, she would support him by doing the same.

"Eating breakfast," she smiled cheerfully.

"Don't you take that tone with me!" her father said.

"What tone?" she asked. "You asked a question, and I answered."

"You gave your mother quite a shock this morning when you weren't in your room. We've been worried sick about you. And now we find out that you're here with this... this..."

"Don't say something you'll regret," she told him. "I'll have you know that Brandon is not the same boy who stayed with us six years ago. He's changed. And if you'll just give him the chance to explain himself, you would see that."

"I don't care how much he's changed. You spent the night with him, didn't you?"

"As a matter of fact, she did," Brandon told him. "Mr. Whitaker, sir, I want you to understand something. Your daughter is a very special girl, and I would never allow her to come to harm. If not for the good example that she showed me when I stayed with your family, I would probably be in prison right now, if not dead."

"But he's turned his life around, graduated from college, and is starting on his Master's degree," Kelly added. "He doesn't drink, smoke, do drugs, or swear anymore either."

"No, but he sleeps with fifteen-year-old girls." Then he turned back to Brandon. "You're lucky I didn't bring my shotgun," he said. "As it is, you're going to get off with a long prison sentence instead. I'm going to call the police as soon as I get home. Have you ever heard of the phrase 'statutory rape'?"

So there it was. He had said what they were all thinking. Their conversation cut off in an abrupt silence, emphasizing the last words he had said.

It wasn't fair, Kelly thought. Brandon had worked so hard to get where he was. He had managed to change his life for the better. For six years he had been a model of good behavior. And now, because of one mistake and one stubborn father, everything he had worked for was falling apart. Despite his courageous insistence on facing the consequences, he didn't deserve that.

Kelly wanted to yell. She wanted to scream. She wanted to cry.

Instead, she laughed.

Brandon and her father both stared at her. Kelly continued laughing, ignoring her father and her lover. She laughed until she had to sit down in one of the chairs, clutching her sides as tears rolled down her cheeks.

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked Mr. Whitaker.

"You think we slept together?" she asked.

"He admitted it!" her father insisted.

"He admitted that I spent the night with him. Here. In the cabin. That's all he admitted."

"So what are you saying, Kelly?"

She let the laughter dwindle to a mere smile. She looked her father in the eyes, and mustered up a calm and collected voice. Then Kelly Whitaker, the girl who never lied, said, "I slept on the couch."

Once more the two men stared at her. She glanced at Brandon, but couldn't read the expression on his face.

*It's okay, she wished she could tell him. Just this once. Please don't mess it up by doing the noble thing. I don't want you to be noble right now. For just a moment, let the Bad Boy out.*

"You mean..." her father breathed, relief clearly on his face.

"I might as well come right out and say it," she said. "Brandon and I did not have sex."

Mr. Whitaker sighed. "But honey, why did you stay here last night?" he asked.

"I insisted," Brandon replied for her. "She dropped by for a social visit, and then it started pouring down rain. I wasn't about to throw her out in the rain like that. And as you no doubt noticed, I don't have a car so I couldn't drive her home. I would have called, but the phone isn't working. You can check for yourself."

"That won't be necessary," said Mr. Whitaker. Then he turned back to his daughter. "But why did you sneak out at night?"

"Because you wouldn't let me go during the daytime. You weren't willing to give Brandon a chance. If you had just come and visited him yourself, you would have known that I would be perfectly safe in his presence. He was a perfect gentleman the whole time."

Now he looked at Brandon with newfound respect. "It seems I owe you an apology," he said.

"No need," Brandon smiled. "I can't fault you for trying to protect Kelly. I would do the same thing if I had a daughter. And I'll be the first to admit that the situation looks a little suspicious."

Now Mr. Whitaker turned to address his daughter. "Young lady," he said, "for sneaking out at night and making your mother worry, you're grounded for a week."

She nodded. It was no more than she had expected.

"But after that week's over," he added in a softer tone, "if you want to visit Brandon again, I have no objections. Now come on. Let's get you home so your mother can stop worrying."

"Can I have a minute alone with Brandon to say goodbye?" she asked.

"Sure. I'll be out in the car." Her father turned around, then paused. Then he turned to face Brandon again. "As for you, would you like to have dinner with us tonight? We have some steaks sitting in the freezer

waiting for a special occasion, and celebrating your return is as good as any. I'd be happy to drive by and pick you up, say around six."

"I'd love that," he smiled.

Mr. Whitaker nodded and shook Brandon's hand, then slipped out the door, closing it behind him.

"Kelly--" Brandon began, but she cut him off.

"I know what you're going to say," she told him. "Something about not hiding from the consequences anymore. You don't want me to lie to protect you. Well, last time something like this happened, you had nothing to lose. Now you have nothing to gain, and *everything* to lose. So maybe in this one instance it's better to break the rules."

He nodded. "Maybe you're right," he said. "You truly are my guardian angel."

Kelly blushed. She threw her arms around him, hugging him tightly, though she refrained from giving him a goodbye kiss in case her father could see them through the window. Then she smiled, turned, and left the house.

She climbed into the car next to her dad. She didn't like keeping a secret from him, but it had to be done, for everyone's sake. As they pulled out of the driveway, Kelly glanced back and saw Brandon smiling at them from the front door.

Yes, it was better that way. For the first time in Brandon's life, everything was all right.

## THE END

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