

Such Fleeting Pleasures

An Oberon Novella

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*But when I crept with leaves to hide
those parts, which maids keep unespied,
such fleeting pleasures there I took,
that with the fancy I awoke...*
(Herrick—The Vine)

Chapter One

Despite the brilliantly gold, late afternoon sunlight that filtered in through the frosted windows, Dan Cavanaugh was aware of a growing sense of dejection as he ambled through the big, empty greenhouse. There was a heaviness in his chest that even the familiar scents of clean soil and chlorophyll could not dispel. For five years he had stayed away from home, and in all that time—"Nothing's changed."

He had practically grown up here, in his family's Nursery. As a child, the surrounding fields had been his playground; an entire world, where he was king of all he surveyed. Later, he'd worked weekends and summers here until he could no longer stand either the sight or the smell of the place, nor endure, for even one more minute, the constant bickering with his father over every last little detail of the running of it. When he left Oberon for college he vowed he'd never step foot in this place again, and yet here he was, twenty three years old, and about to temporarily take over as nursery manager while his parents were off on a long anticipated tour of Europe.

He'd hoped that spending the summer here would give him the chance to figure a few things out. But five minutes had already been long enough for him to make a start.

First of all, he now knew that there was no way he could spend the rest of his life locked away in some office or classroom. He needed to work with his hands again. He needed to spend at least part of each day outdoors. And he needed the connection to the earth with which he'd grown up. He'd missed all of that these last five years--more than he ever imagined he could.

Unfortunately, his second revelation in about as many minutes, was that he could never be truly happy working for somebody else. So unless things around here had changed enough for him to handle coming back on a permanent basis, then he very much feared that he was effectively out of options where his future was concerned.

So far, everything seemed all too depressingly the same.

“What are you doing here?” An unfamiliar female voice startled him out of his reverie. He almost jumped in surprise. He thought he was alone. He should have been alone too, damn it—since he’d purposely waited for the end of the day, until the business was closed and he was sure everyone had gone home, before he drove out here, just so he could avoid running into anyone else.

By rights, neither one of us should be here now, he thought, as he spun around to confront the young woman who was regarding him with a cool self-assurance that both amused and intrigued him. She appeared to be about his age, or maybe a few years his junior, and to look at her standing there, hands planted firmly on her very attractive hips, anyone would have supposed that she owned the place and that he was the interloper. He suppressed a smile at her arrogance. *What am I doing here?* Well, he could ask her the same question!

“I said, what are you doing here?” she repeated impatiently, and he did smile, then. Perhaps there had been a few changes here, after all.

“Ohh, I was just taking a look around.” He shrugged, and took a good, long look at her too, while he was at it. *Cute*. He felt his smile widen in appreciation. *Very cute*. *Very definitely cute*. Even with annoyance flashing in the depths of her chocolate brown eyes, and the damp tendrils of dark hair that clung to her neck.

Her face was flushed with heat, a reaction to the temperatures here in the greenhouse, no doubt, although he suspected that everything about her would still be screaming *heat* at him, even if they were both blue with cold and standing in an igloo.

Just the same, he couldn't help but feel fervently grateful for the sultry conditions around them, if that was what was responsible for the abbreviated outfit she wore. Her bare shoulders rose out of a yellow halter top that seemed barely big enough to contain her full, round breasts, and which brilliantly accentuated the narrowness of her waist. Her cut-off jeans had been slit high enough on the sides to expose an extremely gratifying amount of firm, tanned thigh. So, okay, maybe the scuffed work boots didn't do all that much for him, but, he decided, as his glance slid slowly back up the bronze expanse of bare leg, he could easily overlook a little thing like that.

"Well, I'd say you've looked long enough," she remarked dryly when his eyes finally returned to her face. "So now you can go."

She appeared neither discomfited by his blatant inspection, nor overly impressed by either his presence or by what he'd come to believe was his most charming smile. Dan felt somewhat aggrieved. He liked women, and they generally liked him, too. He wasn't used to being so summarily dismissed. Nor did he especially enjoy being ordered out of his own nursery.

He felt his own stubborn temper flare. "Oh, I don't think so," he answered, returning her stare coolly. He folded his arms across his chest and leaned back against one of the tables. "I like it here. I think I'll stay for a while."

"Think again," she snapped, and her voice took on an even more steel-like tone. "Perhaps you're not clear on the concept, but we happen to be closed right now."

He studied her curiously. “I know that. So why are you still here?”

“That’s none of your business.”

A faint smile tugged at his lips. “Actually it is, you know.”

“Oh, really? How’s that?” For a split second he thought her assurance seemed to waver, but annoyance quickly reasserted itself, and she waved away the explanations he’d been about to make. “No. Never mind. I don’t care. I just want you out of here. Now.”

Dan stared at her for a moment in silence. She was really serious about throwing him out, he realized, and he couldn’t for the life of him figure out how she expected to achieve her goal without his active cooperation. “So, you’re gonna make me leave?” he asked, just to make sure he was getting things straight.

“Damn right I am,” she said, so supremely confident that Dan was almost overwhelmed by the desire to rattle her chain a little. As bad an idea as he’d ever had, since they’d probably end up having to work together all summer; but still...oohh...awfully hard to resist.

“Don’t you even want to know who I am?” he asked, ignoring the temptation as best he could and resolving to give her one final chance to back down. But she was having none of it.

“Seriously? I don’t care who you are.”

It was mostly the fact that he believed her, and was unreasonably annoyed by her obvious disinterest in him, that caused his resolve to evaporate like water dropped on a hot skillet. He shrugged. “So fine, then. Make me.”

Instantly, dark brows snapped together in a fierce scowl. He watched as she raised herself to her full height of maybe five-four, and glared imperiously at him down the length of her nose. "Excuse me?" she uttered in scathing tones that he found unexpectedly intriguing. He found himself smiling again, in spite of himself.

"Yeah, that's right. You heard me," he said, standing up then also, and glinting down at her. He towered over her by almost a foot, and probably outweighed her by a good hundred pounds, but she still wouldn't budge; and he still couldn't decide how he felt about that--amused, impressed or just really, really pissed. "C'mon, babe. Give it your best shot. Make me leave. That is, if you think you can."

"Look, you," she snarled, "I don't know who the hell you think you are--"

"The name's Cavanaugh," he interrupted mildly, "just like the nursery."

"Or what you think you're doing here, but I want you out of my greenhouse. And I want you out now!"

He choked back a laugh. "Oh, it's your greenhouse is it? That's a good one. 'Cause, you know, I always thought of it as mine."

She continued to glare at him, and he was determined to get a rise out of her somehow. "So, uh...if it's your greenhouse, I guess that would make you a Cavanaugh too, huh?" he asked her with sardonic sweetness, "Now, that's a real shame, sweetheart."

She hesitated, but finally curiosity got the better of her. "Yeah? Why's that?"

"Well, I mean, incest never really held any appeal for me before," he teased. "But in your case--I don't know. I just might be willing to make an exception."

"Huh!" she snorted inelegantly. "In your dreams!"

He wagged his eyebrows and smiled down at her without making any answer.

“I don’t believe this shit,” she muttered to herself, closing her eyes for just an instant, before turning the full force of her glare back up at his face. “Okay, look, do I really have to call the cops for you? Because, trust me, I can have one out here so fast it’ll make your head spin.”

Dan shrugged. “Go right ahead. But you’d be wasting your time. The cops aren’t gonna make me leave, either.”

“Because you’re a Cavanaugh, right?” she said mockingly.

“That’s right, babe.”

“Well, let me tell you something, whoever you are, I’ve been working here for almost three years now. I know all of the Cavanaughs. And you are--” She broke off suddenly, frowning; her eyes narrowed suspiciously as she focused intently on his features.

“Dan,” he supplied helpfully, extending his hand. “Pleased to meet you.”

If she knew any of his family, the resemblance shouldn’t be too hard to spot. *Ah-ha! Now she’s got it.* He watched the flood of color in her cheeks and knew he was grinning like a fool at the confounded expression on her face.

She recovered quickly, though, he’d give her that. Within seconds she’d buried her embarrassment beneath another scowl. “That still doesn’t explain what you’re doing here,” she said as she continued to ignore his hand.

“Jesus. Are we back to that again?” Dan sighed as he crossed his arms once again and gave up all his attempts to push her buttons. Obviously, it couldn’t be done. “Look, it’s like I told you, I just wanted to take a look around, before--” He paused. Shit. She obviously hadn’t heard about his father’s plan. She was going to hear about it sooner or later; and either way, he had a feeling she wasn’t going to like it.

He shrugged, “My dad asked me to take over for the summer. You know, so he and my mom could get away for a while? They’re going to Europe. They might have mentioned that part?”

“Take over?” He watched her jaw clench, watched her eyes grow narrow again; and no, he thought, she really didn’t like that idea. Not at all. “Do you mean—so, you’d be like--”

“Your new boss?” he couldn’t resist making one last attempt at teasing her. “Sure looks that way, huh? So, I’m guessing my dad didn’t get around to informing you all of his plan yet?”

“No,” she said, shortly. “He didn’t.”

“Yeah, well, Bill’s always been a great one for surprising people.”

She glared at him sullenly, her arms crossed tightly over her chest. “I don’t like surprises.”

“I’ll try to remember that,” he said softly. “Now, how about you tell me who you are and what you’re doing here. Because as one of us mentioned, not too long ago, the place is supposed to be closed.”

She shrugged and looked away. "I just had some work I wanted to finish up." Something about the way she said it made him think there might be more to the story than that. He wondered if someone--maybe her?--had found and revived his private pot farm. If she had, there was obviously no way he'd get her to admit it right now.

"Do you do this a lot, then? Stay on here after everyone else has gone home?"

"Yeah. I do," she answered, tilting her head to one side and fixing him with a look that was one hundred percent pure challenge. "You gonna have a problem with that?"

"No, I don't think so. Not as long as you don't try to kick me out of here anymore." He tried the smile on her again, but she didn't return this one either, or give him any kind of reply; merely nodded shortly and turned toward the exit.

"Hey!" he called after her. "You still haven't told me who you are. And, you know, I'm gonna find out sometime. Might as well be now, don't you think?"

She stopped, and turned to face him again. "Greco," she told him finally, heaving a frustrated sigh. "Lucy Greco."

Even in the face of her recalcitrance, he couldn't seem to stop smiling at her. "Well, Ms. Greco, as I said before, it's been a real pleasure meeting you."

"Oh, yeah?" And finally she did smile; a brittle, malicious, little grin that didn't come close to warming her eyes. "Well, I guess the pleasure's been all yours then, Cavanaugh," she said, and she spun around and once more headed for the door.

Dan stopped laughing long enough for one parting shot. "I'll see you around Greco," he called to her just as she pulled open the door.

“Ha! Not if I see you first,” she called back, not stopping nor even bothering to turn around. The door swung shut behind her, and she was gone.

“Jesus!” Dan announced to the empty greenhouse. What just happened here? His head was spinning and he had to force himself not to follow after her.

He still didn’t know if he could handle staying here long term, but the next few months suddenly looked a lot more interesting than he’d ever imagined they could.

So the pleasure’s all mine, huh? He chuckled to himself. *Well, we’ll just have to see about that...*

* * *

“Oh, shit. Would you look at what that man’s done to me now?” Lucy fumed later that evening, as she visited with her best friend, Marsha, for their weekly reggae party—Marsha’s nod to her infant daughter’s Caribbean ancestry. Lucy dabbed uselessly at the grape juice she’d just spilled all down the front of her favorite halter top. “I’m a wreck!”

“I don’t really think you can blame that on him,” Marsha chuckled, idly patting her baby on the back. “And...I don’t know, Luce. Do you really think it’ll be so bad, working with this guy? From your description, it sounded like you though he was cute.”

“Cute? Oh, my God.” Lucy scowled at her friend. Marsha looked tired, a not so surprising side-effect of both new motherhood and the sickly green glow being cast by the string of palm tree shaped party lights that twinkled above their heads--she also looked completely serious. “You’re out of your mind. He is not *cute*. And it’ll be an absolute nightmare trying to work with the man. No, make that working *for* him, God help me. I’m telling you, Marsha, we’ll be lucky if we don’t kill each other.”

Marsha twirled a cocktail umbrella between her fingers as she studied Lucy thoughtfully. “Hmm. Sounds to me like the lady does protest too much.”

“Huh, not hardly,” Lucy muttered, angrily. She leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. “And quit misquoting stuff you can’t remember. It’s annoying.”

Marsha grinned. “So how does it go, then. If you know so much.”

“I don’t know. I just know...it’s not like that.” Lucy blotted at her shirt again, though she knew the effort was wasted. The top was ruined--big, purple blotches all over it--no way at all to repair the damage. *And it’s all his fault.* Dan’s face swam into focus in her mind once again, smiling—no, laughing at her, the big jerk—his bright blue eyes gleaming hotly. “Why can’t I ever meet anyone with brains? Instead of all these...Neanderthals.”

“Someone who wouldn’t misquote Shakespeare, you mean?” Without warning, Marsha’s expression changed to one of alarm. “Oh, man, talk about deja vu. Are you positive you’ve never mentioned this guy before? Because I’m getting the weirdest feeling we’ve had this same conversation. Only, it didn’t seem quite so funny, the other time around.”

“Well, you’re the only one who seems to think it’s funny, this time,” Lucy pointed out. “Of course I’ve never mentioned him before, Marsha. Jeez, haven’t you been listening? I’ve only just met the jerk! And, trust me on this. He’s *not* someone I’d find all that easy to forget.”

Chapter Two

The next few weeks passed with painful slowness, and proved to be exactly the nightmare Lucy had prophesized. She found it hard to forget about Dan for even a minute at a time.

She hated the nervous, fluttery sensations she always felt in her stomach whenever he was around. She hated how just the sound of his voice caused the hairs on the back of her neck to stand up. And she really hated his conceited attitude. He thought he knew so much about the nursery—way more than he had any right to know, considering he hadn't even been in town for years and years. And, the truth was, he didn't know everything. He didn't even know as much as he thought he did, for that matter.

Still, he did know a lot. And she hated that, too. In fact, if she were honest...oh, hell...he knew almost as much as she did. Maybe even a little bit more than she did about some things—boring, business kinds of things that she couldn't care less about, like payroll and taxes and all that sort of crap.

But, most of all, above and beyond everything else he did, Lucy hated the way Dan looked at her. As if he were constantly remembering the way she had embarrassed herself in front of him at their first meeting.

“Well, he probably is,” Marsha pointed out, at their next get-together. “After all, *you* certainly are.”

“Am not,” Lucy snapped. She glowered at her friend over the rim of her glass—virgin pina coladas this week. The idea was ridiculous. She’d hardly given the matter any thought at all. “You make it sound like I’m obsessed with him.”

Marsha chuckled. “No, *you* make it sound like you’re obsessed with him. Really, Luce, what do you have against the guy?”

“What do I have against him? Try everything!” Lucy said, wishing like hell that the new leaf Marsha had decided to turn over when she found out she was pregnant hadn’t included a seemingly life-time ban on alcohol, pot, coffee, cigarettes, even meat. Lucy was a loyal friend, she would continue to join Marsha for their weekly get-togethers, come hell or high water, for the rest of their lives, if that’s what Marsha needed her to do. But after five weeks of Dan-God’s-gift-to-women-Cavanaugh, an evening of Bob Marley, pineapple juice and red peas and rice just wasn’t cutting it. Even if there were fried bananas for dessert. “I just...I hate that he’s such a flirt, for one thing. I mean, it’s embarrassing.”

“Embarrassing, huh?” A smile tinged Marsha’s face, but Lucy thought she was looking just the slightest bit wistful. “You didn’t tell me he was flirting with you. How? What does he say?”

“Yes, embarrassing. He’s a grown man! He shouldn’t be acting like such a, a, jackrabbit. Or a Bull Moose in rut. Or some even lower form of animal life. In fact, it’s worse than embarrassing. It’s disgusting, is what it is. I mean, he’s doing this at work!”

“And?” Marsha looked at her expectantly. “Come on, don’t hold out on me. Vicarious thrills are the only kind I’ve got. How does he flirt with you? What does he say? What does he do?”

“What?” Lucy frowned at her friend in confusion. “Marsha, are you insane? He doesn’t flirt with *me*!” She shook her head. “I hate having to credit the man for any intelligence at all, but at least he has the good sense not to try any of his stupid ploys on me.” Although, come to think of it, she doubted if it was sense. More likely a mere lack of interest on his part. “He doesn’t like me, remember?”

“Oh,” Marsha said, as she began to eat. Shoveling beans and rice into her mouth as though she were suddenly starving.

“What?” Lucy asked, eyeing her friend suspiciously. “I told you before that he doesn’t like me. That’s been clear from the start—hasn’t it? And, thank God for that. I mean, can you imagine? It’s hard enough trying to get along with him as it is.”

“Okay, so let me see if I’ve got this straight, “ Marsha said after a moment, clearly suppressing a smile. “You’re upset with him because he *doesn’t* flirt with you. Is that what you’re saying?”

Lucy’s hand tightened around her glass. Marsha had been through a real rough time these last few years; first an accident, then the pregnancy, the resultant rift with her family, on-going health problems. And, while Lucy was not the kind of person who would ever kick a friend while she was down on her luck, at the moment...she was coming pretty damn close. “No, that’s not what I’m saying, Marsha. And you damn well know it. Now, cut it out, ‘cause you’re getting me pissed.”

Marsha sighed. “Come on, Lucy, be honest. How much time have we spent in the last few weeks talking about this guy? No, never mind that, how much time have you spent thinking about him? Here? At home? At work? So, don’t tell me you’re not obsessed. Hell, I bet you even dream about him, don’t you?”

Lucy lifted her drink, stuck the straw in her mouth and sucked, ignoring the question. She *had* dreamed about him, damn it, and only last night. A really vivid nightmare, in which they were both stark naked and-- “Well, how could I not think about him, Marsha, when I’m constantly having to go up against him? I’m telling you, it’s a nightmare!”

“A nightmare, huh?” Marsha grinned suddenly. “You mean one of those dreams where you’re out in public, completely naked?”

“What?” Lucy stared at her friend, appalled. Was she reading her mind?

Marsha frowned. “Sorry, I don’t know where that came from. I just...I got this picture in my head, all of a sudden, and--”

“Well, get it out again,” Lucy said. She shook her head. “I’m not talking about that kind of nightmare, Marsha. I’m talking about work. You don’t know what that’s like. I’m all the time having to correct his mistakes, or arguing with him over every little thing. And, trust me, I sure don’t need the hassle.”

“Then why do it?” Marsha asked. “Quit arguing. Let him make mistakes. Give yourself some space. What’s wrong with that?”

“Because, I can’t, that’s why,” Lucy insisted. “Because now that his parents are off on vacation, he’s supposed to be in charge. Everyone’s got requests and questions and problems, but only about half the employees are going to him for help in straightening stuff out. The other half are coming to me--including Mr. Wonderful’s brother, Kenny. Which has to say something about how impossible he is to get along with, doesn’t it?”

“Not necessarily,” Marsha said quietly. “Families are funny that way. Just because they’re brothers, that doesn’t mean they have to get along, you know.”

Lucy shook her head. “No, that’s not it, either. You’re missing the point. You’ve met Kenny--he gets along with everyone.”

“You mean, he likes you, too.” Marsha smiled. “Maybe that’s part of the problem?”

“We’re friends,” Lucy insisted, ignoring the *too*. “We’re just friends.” She liked Kenny. He was cute, he was funny, he was smart. He was a really nice guy. But she wasn’t attracted enough to want to get naked with him. And she wasn’t desperate enough to put up with the gossip and the teasing that was sure to follow, if she did.

“Well, it must be awfully hard on him,” Marsha said. “I mean, trying to run a business with so much resistance, that can’t be much fun.”

Lucy frowned. “What are you talking about? Kenny’s not trying to-- Oh.”

Marsha shook her head. “I’m not talking about Kenny. I’m talking about Dan.”

Dan. Just the sound of his name had Lucy grinding her teeth and started a vague queasiness in the pit of her stomach.

“I feel sorry for him. He’s probably very unhappy.”

“Sorry?” Lucy gaped at her friend. “Oh, please! Marsha, that’s just absurd. It’s like saying you feel sorry for Henry the Eighth because he never got to celebrate a Silver Anniversary. It’s his own damn fault if he’s unhappy. And I, for one, have no patience, no time and no sympathy to waste on the likes of Daniel Edward Cavanaugh.”

Marsha shot her a curious glance. “How’d you find out his middle name?”

“What?” Lucy felt her cheeks redden. “I don’t know. It was on some papers.”

A smile glimmered on Marsha's lips. "You looked it up."

"I did *not* look it up," Lucy insisted. "It was just...there. In the office. In the files." In the old files. The very old files. Which were buried in the bottom drawer of a very locked filing cabinet.

"Well," Marsha said, after a moment. "It's certainly turning out to be an interesting summer, that's for sure."

"Interesting?" Lucy shook her head. "Yeah. That's just the word I was thinking. As far as I'm concerned, this summer can't possibly end soon enough."

* * *

It was a week later, and Lucy was watering some seedlings when the air was rent by a horrible noise.

"Greco!"

She could have heard Dan's bellow from about half a mile away, but instead, curse her luck, he was right here. Storming toward her with murder in his eyes, and a scrap of paper clutched tightly in his fist.

"I need to talk to you!"

Now, there's something different. Lucy sighed. "What is it this time, Cavanaugh? Don't tell me you've got another problem?" Crossing her arms, she glared right back at him, purposely covering up the nervous tingles that went tumbling down her spine. She didn't think he'd actually try to hurt her--and if he ever did, she knew her brother and her cousin would waste no time at all in taking him apart. But all the same, he was rather frightening when he got like this.

“Yeah, I got a problem all right,” he growled, shuddering to a halt when he was only inches away from her. So close, she had to force herself not to retreat. “You want to tell me what the hell this is?”

He extended the piece of paper toward her, but she made no move to take it from him. Why should she? She knew what it was, after all--she'd written it, hadn't she? Question was, what part of it was so unclear that he had to ask for an explanation?

She shrugged. “I thought it was pretty clear, myself. Joanne's taking next week off. Carla's working Monday and Thursday for her, Kenny's got Wednesday covered, Mark's got Friday. And I didn't bother scheduling anyone to work for her Saturday, because we're always overstaffed, anyway, on the weekends.”

“*You* didn't bother to schedule anyone? Why the hell would you even think about it? Since when is making up the employee schedule any part of your job?”

She looked at him in surprise. “Well, exactly,” she replied as reasonably as she could. “That's supposed to be *your* job, isn't it? So, if you want to schedule someone else to work on Saturday, why don't you just go ahead and do it?”

He glared at her malevolently, but she resisted the urge to turn and run; returning his scowl instead and asking, as fiercely as she could manage. “Was there something else you wanted, Cavanaugh? Or do you want to let me get back to work now?”

“I told Joanne she couldn't have the week off.”

She nodded. “Yeah, I know that. But she had the vacation time coming to her, and that's the only week her husband could get away.”

“That's not the point,” he growled again.

She heaved another sigh. “Well then, what is the point, hmm? Carla, Mark and Kenny didn’t have any problems with it. And Gina in Accounting doesn’t care. So why do you?”

“Do you do this on purpose?” he asked, catching her off guard, as usual, since she wasn’t aware of doing anything in particular.

“Huh? Do what?”

“Plot things like this, just to drive me out of my mind?”

Drive him out of his mind? Ha! That’d be a switch. “Yeah, Cavanaugh, that’s right. Because I’ve got nothing better to think about all day than you!”

He had to be the most arrogant, self-centered, egotistical jerk she’d ever met, she fumed, as she hurried away from him. Imagine. Accusing her of plotting against him. Why, the whole idea was just...ridiculous! The man was clearly paranoid to have even thought of it. Of course, she wouldn’t be human if she didn’t take just the littlest bit of pleasure from occasionally winning a round or two with him. But plotting? It was to laugh!

* * *

Dan watched as Lucy stalked away after winning yet another battle. He knew the smart thing to do, at this point, was to ignore her. But that was impossible. And every confrontation between them left his emotions in an ever more tangled confusion of fury, lust and frustration. *If only she wasn’t so cute*, he thought wistfully, maybe then he’d stand half a chance of retaining some small shreds of his sanity. *But oh, God is she ever!* She was so damn cute, in fact, that it--*oh, fuck no.*

Dan shook his head, disgusted with the imprecision of his thoughts. *Cute?* That was a hell of a word to use for someone like Lucy. Sweet Christ, she was to cute what a volcano was to a kid's birthday candle! And he had the hots for her like he hadn't even known was possible. In fact, it was almost a good thing she wanted nothing to do with him, or so he kept telling himself, because he thought he stood a pretty good chance of bursting right into flames if she ever did express even the slightest bit of interest in him.

But, for better or for worse, her attitude towards him went way beyond a simple lack of attraction. She had a way of looking at him sometimes...shit, it was almost as if he were Satan, and she a newly baptized convert who'd just vowed to reject him and all his works.

*

"What did I ever do to make her look at me like she does?" he'd asked his brother, just the night before while the two of them played pool at The Midnight Bell. "So, I gave her a hard time when she tried to throw me out of the nursery. So what? It's not like she didn't deserve it."

"Well, maybe you should have handled it differently," Kenny had said, giving a little too much attention to the cue he was chalking. "Because, whatever you did, you sure pissed her off."

"Differently," Dan muttered as he tossed back half a mug of beer. "What the hell could I have done, Kenny? Leave? As if that would have changed anything."

Kenny sighed. "Look, Dan, she doesn't like you. Get over it. There are plenty of girls who do. Go after one of them. Leave Lucy alone."

"Ah, that's not it." Dan shook his head. Leave Lucy alone? He wished he could.

“What is it, then?”

Dan shrugged. “Damned if I know.” If it was just a matter of some girl not returning his interest, there wouldn’t be a problem. He could have dealt with that. Christ, it wasn’t like he’d never been turned down before. True, it didn’t happen all that often, but it wasn’t completely unprecedented. He glared at his brother. “Are we gonna play pool or not?”

“Sure,” Kenny replied, putting down the chalk and lining up for a shot.

“Trying to work with her is a total nightmare, too,” Dan muttered.

Kenny heaved an exasperated sigh. “Oh?”

“Well, yeah.” Dan looked at his brother in surprise. He hadn’t noticed? “She questions everything I do. She countermands orders like—well, like she has any kind of right to! And as far as her own job goes--”

Well, that was a lost cause, wasn’t it? There wasn’t even any point in his trying to tell her what to do. She’d made it clear, right from the start, that she’d do exactly what she wanted, in whatever order suited her. And since she was so damned efficient at everything she did, Dan knew he had no choice but to let her get away with it.

Especially since, so far, every time he’d tried to force her into doing anything else, he had come across looking like a petty tyrant. Which he was pretty sure she’d figured out long before he had.

“What? You got a problem with her work?” Kenny asked, smiling in disbelief.

“You’re kidding right? Come on, Dan, not even Dad has a problem with that.”

And, that was another thing-- “How the fuck did things get so messed up? I can’t believe Bill lets her get away with shit like this. The old man certainly never let anyone pull stunts like that back when I was working for him.”

In fact, his father had pretty much made a point of raking someone--usually Dan--over the coals at least once a week. And it had never seemed to matter whether he’d done anything to deserve it, or not. His father had just been out to prove how impartial he was.

Oh, and he was impartial all right. He treated everyone like shit.

Kenny turned back toward the table, lined up and shot. He smiled as the ball dropped in the pocket. “I don’t know what to tell you, Dan. We’ve never been a problem, until this summer. That’s all I can say.”

“Well, how the hell is that possible—huh? Has she bewitched everyone, or what? You’re not saying this mess is *my* fault, are you?” The Good Lord knew that Dan was as blameless as a baby.

“I’m not saying anything,” Kenny said, lining up for his next shot.

“That’s just bullshit,” Dan murmured. He’d practically bent over backwards trying to accommodate Lucy. Why he’d even gone so far as to admit that there were maybe some areas where she had better--or at least, more current--knowledge than he had. Especially where some of the employees were concerned. But— “Let me tell you something, else bro. I’ve got a lifetime’s worth of experience compared to her two measly years there. So, it’ll be a cold day in hell before I’ll bow down to her supposedly superior expertise.”

“No one’s asking you to,” Kenny replied as he sank another ball.

His brother was looking entirely too cheerful, Dan thought, as he signaled the waitress for another beer.

A cold day in hell—yeah, there was a thought. Shit, at this point, Dan would have welcomed a cold day anywhere. The heat that blazed between them had him tied up in permanent knots. Cold was the last thing he was ever going to feel, as long as Lucy was anywhere in his vicinity. And, hell, when was she ever just in the vicinity, either? She was usually right in his Goddamn face. Every time he turned around, it seemed. And always wearing one of those mindblowingly sexy outfits of hers. “I mean, Jesus, doesn’t she even own any normal clothes?”

“What?” Kenny turned to stare at him. “What are you talking about?”

“Nothing,” Dan mumbled. “Never mind.” He had considered asking her to do something about her wardrobe, but she was so damn ready to spite him, he figured there was a good chance she’d show up for work the next day topless.

Which, when he thought about it, might almost be worth the trouble it would cause.

The problem was, Dan suspected his issue was not the clothes themselves. They really weren’t all that exceptional, for the most part—at least she hadn’t shown up in that damn yellow halter-top again. It was simply the fact that she was the one wearing them. And he didn’t suppose there was a whole helluva lot she could do about that.

He sighed. Any way he looked at it, he was pretty well screwed. Or, more to the point, not screwed. Definitely not screwed...

*

How long would he be able to stand the growing tension between them, Dan wondered now, grinding his teeth together so fiercely it was a wonder they didn't crumble into dust. How long before she drove him to do something irredeemably stupid? A day? A week? Another five minutes? It had been only six weeks since they'd met. Six short weeks, and the woman was making him crazy.

Things could not go on like this. *He* couldn't go on like this. Not for any time at all. One way or another, he had to end this insanity. Now. He wheeled around, and headed off after her, without any clear thought about what he might actually do when he caught up with her; only knowing that he had to do something.

Chapter Three

Lucy had retreated to one of the older, less-utilized greenhouses to lick her wounds after her latest skirmish with Dan. She couldn't understand what it was about the man that rattled her so. Why must her heart insist on pounding madly whenever he loomed over her--something he was forever doing. He had a way of pushing buttons she didn't even know she had, and for the life of her, she didn't see why so many otherwise intelligent people seemed to consider him both attractive and charming.

He wasn't even all that good looking! Not really. His eyes were entirely too blue and his teeth were too white and he was just...way too big, that's all. So what if he was strong and muscular? So was an ox. Big and clumsy. And dumb.

Leaning her elbows on one of the potting benches, she buried her face in her hands, and sighed. Okay, if she was going to be completely honest, she had to admit that he wasn't altogether clumsy. She'd noticed that a few evenings earlier, when she'd watched him playing Frisbee with some of the other guys out in the parking lot after work. Big as he was, he was almost startlingly graceful. She couldn't help but admire the way his bare skin, slick with sweat, gleamed in the late afternoon sunlight, how the muscles of his back moved when he jumped to make a catch. He was tall, dark and...oh, okay, not really all that dumb, either. At least not about everything. Still, she could only pray that September would come quickly, and he would vanish back into whatever dark hole he'd been conjured from.

The greenhouse door burst open, making her jump. Dan slammed the door closed behind him and she felt her irritation spike up another notch. Was there no getting away from the man? She dug her fingernails into the wooden bench as she leaned her back against it, and glared at him. He was looking ticked off again, too. *So what else is new?* But what the hell had she done to piss him off, this time?

“All right, Greco, I’ve had just about all I can take of this shit. What is it with you, anyway?” he demanded.

She felt her hackles rise once more, but she held herself together with an effort and returned his scowl with cool indifference. “Can’t this wait, Cavanaugh? Because if you don’t mind, I’m kind of on my break, right now and--”

“No, it can’t wait! And you can damn well take your break some other time, because I want to settle this thing--right here, right now!”

“Okay, then. Fine. It’s your dime, after all,” she said crossing her arms tightly over her chest to conceal the telltale pounding of her heart. “If you really want to pay me to stand around all day and waste time talking to you, who am I to argue?”

“If that means you’ve finally figured out which one of us is supposed to be in charge around here, then it’s about time.”

Lucy nodded. “Well, and it would have been kind of hard to miss,” she replied, agreeably. “What with the way you walk around here like you own the place.”

“I do own the place,” he snapped. “Get used to it, babe.”

She smiled at him with false sweetness as she answered, “Well, gee. I guess I’ve been confused all these years, then, *babe*. ‘Cause I thought it was your family who owned it. And you know, it really is funny but I can’t help noticing that Kenny doesn’t seem to find it necessary to act like such an almighty big shot, just ‘cause his last name’s Cavanaugh. Why is that, do you suppose?”

The look on Dan’s face was sour enough to curdle milk. “Number one, Kenny is not trying to manage this place. And number two, he doesn’t have *you* gunning for him. I swear to Christ, Lucy, this place is like an armed camp any more. Everyone knows that you and I have gone to the mattresses--and I still don’t have a clue what it’s all about.”

“We, we’ve wh-what?” A host of unwelcome images sprang to her mind and she inhaled sharply. “Mattresses? Are you nuts? What the fuck are you talking about?”

He stared at her for a long moment, his face wiped suddenly blank as a slate. “Shit,” he muttered at last, closing his eyes for a moment. “I didn’t mean...It’s...oh, you know...it’s from The Godfather--it means to go to war.”

“The Godfather?” Lucy repeated in disbelief. “You’re using phony Mafia slang, now? To me? Oh, please.”

“Yeah, like you’d really know whether or not it’s phony.” Dan shook his head. “Give me a break Greco, would you for once? I know you’re not *that* tough. Why don’t you just tell me what is it you want from me?”

“N-nothing!” she stammered, as her mouth went dry from nerves. “Not a Goddamn thing!” She was suddenly acutely aware that he was standing between her and the door. “In fact, are we just about finished here? Because, no offense, but I really don’t want to have anything more to do with you right now.”

“Yeah, that would be real hard to miss, too.” He stared at her moodily. “So what is it you’re after then, that you have to set everybody at each other’s throats to get it?”

“You’re saying you think that’s my fault?”

He raised his eyebrows at her. “Oh, I know it’s your fault. I just don’t know why you’re doing it, is all.”

“I am not doing anything,” she growled. “All I know, is we never had any of these problems here before you showed up. I just thank God that everything will go back to normal once September rolls around.”

He frowned at her, curiously. “Yeah? How do you figure that?”

“Because by then your parents will be back here and you’ll be back-- wherever the hell it is you belong. And we can all go on with our lives.”

“Ha!” he laughed. “Well, you’re wrong on at least two counts there, sweetheart. ‘Cause I was here for a lot of years before you ever came on the scene, and we never had any of these problems then, either. And furthermore? I’m not going anywhere come September. So if your big plan was to keep things stirred up until then, just so you could bust my balls, then you just might want to come up with a new one. ‘Cause it ain’t gonna happen.”

“You’re *not* staying?” She felt her mouth drop open and she snapped it shut. “Oh, please, you’re joking, right?”

“No joke, babe. I’m back here for good. So deal with it.”

Lucy nodded grimly. “Okay. How’s this for a deal, then? I guess-- I guess I’ll just quit, that’s all.”

“You what? Oh, jeez. Lucy--” He ran his fingers through his hair and stared at her, and if she weren’t feeling miserable about the prospect of having to find another job, she would have quite enjoyed the look of helpless surprise on his face.

“That’s it? Quitting? That’s how you want to resolve things? That’s your whole solution to this mess?”

She gazed at him, wide-eyed. “What? Don’t tell me you don’t like that idea, either?”

“No, I don’t like it!” he yelled. “Of course I don’t like it. It’s not like I have a problem with, with your work...or, or anything like that. I just...hell, I just want to find a way to work with you, is all.”

“Work with me? Oh, I don’t think that’s what interests you at all. I think what you really like is the idea of having me under you, don’t you, Cavanaugh?” She couldn’t help gloating when his face assumed an almost stunned expression. “Ah-ha, you didn’t think I’d figured that out, did you? But it’s so damn obvious just how much you love playing ‘Lord of the Manor’ with all of us peons.”

“Huh.” Dan stared at her for another moment, and then shook his head, looking away as he muttered, “You know...shit. You really have no idea what you’re saying half the time, do you?”

She took advantage of his inattention to eye the door again, as she thought about making her escape. He was still in her way, but she began edging a little closer to the door, just in case; taking care to stay as close to the wall as possible. “Please. Spare me any more lectures, Cavanaugh.”

“And that’s another thing,” he said, turning his eyes toward her again and freezing her in her tracks. “Why is it you never call me by my name?”

“What? You’re kidding. You mean your name’s really not Cavanaugh, after all?”

“You know what I’m talking about. You always call my brother by his first name.”

“That’s different,” she snapped, nervously. “I like Kenny.”

“And you don’t like me.” He nodded, and then asked, “Why, Lucy?”

Well, there was no way she wanted to get into that with him, was there? She hugged herself tighter and fixed him with her most disdainful frown. “What is this, a new job requirement? I have to like you now, in order to keep working here?”

“Aw, hell. You know that’s not it.” Dan shrugged, jamming his hands into his jeans pockets and frowning unhappily. “I just...c’mon, I really want to know. I mean, what did I ever do to you, anyway?”

“Uh...besides intimidating me every chance you get, d’ya mean?” The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them.

“Intimidated! Oh, yeah, right.” Dan snorted with laughter. Lucy felt her face heat up. He stopped laughing and stared at her doubtfully. “You’re not serious, are you?”

“Look, just stay the hell away from me,” she ordered as she tried to maneuver herself closer to the door, sliding her hand along the edge of the tables, feeling her way without taking her eyes off him. Suddenly she felt a searing pain in her thumb. “Shit!” she cursed, turning her attention to her finger which she’d impaled on the thorn of a large cactus.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she mumbled, although her finger felt as if it were on fire. “I just poked myself on this damned cactus, is all.” She tore off the gloves she was wearing and sucked her thumb into her mouth, drawing on it to ease the pain.

“Oh, Jesus. Now what are you doing? Fuck. Let me see that.”

Dan’s voice sounded so strange; so strangled and tight that she froze with her thumb still in her mouth. She glanced up at him, nervously. What she saw in his face did not reassure her. “No! I told you, it’s fine.”

“Don’t be so stubborn,” he muttered coming toward her, his eyes glittering in a way that was far too intent.

“I said forget it.” She hitched herself up onto the table behind her, determined not to be loomed over again, almost panicking when she realized she’d only curtailed her own mobility. She tried to slide back off the table, but it was too late. He was already right there. Standing way, way, way too close. “I’m warning you Cavanaugh,” she said, as he caught hold of her wrist. “Back off!”

“I can’t believe you’re acting like such a baby about this,” he teased as she tried unsuccessfully to pull her hand away again. “Don’t you want me to kiss it and make it better?”

“You are so dead if you do.”

Lucy’s breath caught in her throat as the smile slid away from his face once again. She licked her lips nervously. Dan’s eyes had gone so black there didn’t appear to be any focus to them at all. She had never seen this particular expression on anyone’s face before, and didn’t know what to make of it now.

“All right, then,” he growled, “but if I’m gonna die anyway--I might as well make it count for something, huh?”

Without warning, he clasped her face between his hands and slammed his mouth down on hers. She was so stunned that her brain didn’t even register the shock for far too long; although she did manage to take note of how firm and how warm his lips were, and how surprisingly good he tasted.

Her eyes slid shut and she kissed him back mindlessly for several heavenly seconds before her brain finally kicked into gear. As soon as it did, she pushed him away. “I don’t fucking believe you! Do you not understand that I hate your guts?”

He blinked at her, breathing hard as he nodded. “Right, I got that.” And the next thing she knew, he had grabbed her by the shoulders and was pulling her close again.

“Wait!” She straight-armed him away, for a second time. “I’m a little confused, Cavanaugh. I say I hate you, and you try to kiss me again? Did that sound like an invitation to you? What’s the thought here?”

He sighed impatiently, but he dropped his hands from her shoulders, shoving them back into his pants’ pockets as he took a half step backwards.

“Damned if I know,” he grumbled, sounding more than a little irritated. “All I know is...I’ve been wanting to kiss you for weeks. Even when you were threatening me with death, I wanted to. Hell, Lucy, if you told me right now you were wearing poisoned lip-gloss I’d probably still be trying to kiss you. I think...shit. You know, this must be how a preying mantis feels. ‘Cause right now--even if I knew you were gonna turn around and start chewing my head off while I was making it with you--I’d still want to make it with you.”

Now it was her turn to blink in confusion. “Preying mantises?” she repeated in disbelief. “Poisoned lip gloss? You are just totally insane, aren’t you?”

He sighed again. “Yeah, I think I must be.”

She stared at him suspiciously. If he was just pulling her chain, she had half a mind to knee him in the balls--see if that didn’t give him something to laugh about. But he was looking too unhappy for this to be some kind of joke and, oh hell...those several seconds had been awfully good.

“Shit,” she muttered. And certain she would regret the impulse but just a little too curious to care, she curled her fingers into the front of his shirt and tugged. “C’mere.” she said as she pulled him back in and covered his mouth with her own.

His arms wrapped around her, pressing her even closer against him, almost lifting her off the table in the process. She hooked her calves behind his thighs and her arms behind his head as she felt a satisfied little moan climb up her throat. Oh, God, he felt good. Now if she could only get a little closer--

She could feel his fingers splayed hard across her back, and his erection pressing even harder against the crotch of her shorts. His heart hammered in his chest, sending shock-waves rippling through her as well, and then his mouth was opening on hers and she was feeling all at once more breathless, hot and dizzy than she ever had in her life.

She was twenty years old. She had kissed her fair share of boys, and had even gone to bed with a couple of them. But they had all been...well, boys. And the experience, while pleasant enough, had always been something she could either take or leave. She had never before been kissed by a man who actually knew what he was doing, and the difference was...amazing. She opened her mouth wider, pressed herself closer, and kissed him back for all she was worth.

Ah, now this, she thought blissfully, through a mind gone almost totally numb and hazy with pleasure, *this is definitely more like it*. This was something she'd maybe almost risk poisoned lip-gloss for, herself. But still: it wasn't enough.

She was so caught up in her attempts to get enough—of whatever it was she was still missing—that she hadn't even realized he'd unhooked her bra, and that now, both it and her tank top were scrunched up under her arms, until he pulled away, breathing hard.

"Ah, God," he groaned, "Just look at you."

She followed his gaze. He had both her breasts cupped in his big hands and the contrast—his dark, tanned fingers curving around the creamy pale skin of them as he pressed them together, her nipples, hard and distended, a dark, dusky rose color—was all so startlingly erotic that she was mesmerized by the sight. So, apparently, was he. For several seconds, they both just stared; and then his hands flexed on her and she shuddered at the touch. Shuddered—and then nearly jumped out of her skin as reality, in the form of voices, from people passing outside the windows, intruded.

“Oh, shit. What the hell are you doing?” she hissed, pushing his hands away and pulling her clothes together. “Are you crazy? We can’t do this here!”

“Right, right.” His eyes scanned the greenhouse feverishly. “Not here. Not...”

She grabbed his face in her hands and forced him to look at her. “Cavanaugh! Listen up! Not anywhere in here. Not anywhere within miles of here!”

His eyes seemed to focus with great difficulty on her face. But finally he let out a deep breath, and nodded agreement. “Okay. All right,” he said as he grabbed her by the waist and lifted her off the table. Then he took her hand and began pulling her towards the door.

Lucy dug in her heels and pulled back, and felt her arm almost leave its socket as she yanked him to a halt. “Whoa! Wait a minute. Where the hell are we going now?” she demanded.

Dan swung around impatiently. “My apartment, where else?” he announced, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“What?” she squealed, her voice squeaky with shock. “Why?”

“Why?” he repeated it after her, as if he didn’t understand the question. And then, wrapping his hand around the nape of her neck he hauled her up onto her toes and kissed her. Hard. His other hand moving just as hard over her breast, sending waves of hot sensation cascading through her. Until she was even more dizzy and breathless than before. Until she could no longer remember the question she had just asked. Until she could barely even remember her own name.

“That’s why,” he gasped, when he finally let her go and, “Oh,” was all the answer she could manage.

And then they were out of the greenhouse and crossing the yard. Bright sunlight slapped her in the face, and she could barely tell in which direction they were headed.

“Dan!” She heard Kenny call from somewhere close at hand, and she forced herself to focus. “Hey, I was just looking for you. Where’re you—”

Dan dug a set of keys out of his jeans pocket with the hand that was not grasping hers, and tossed them at his brother. “Kenny, here. I gotta go. Lock the place up for me, okay?”

“Why? What’s going on?” Kenny’s eyes swung back and forth between the two of them uneasily, his expression registering alarm. “Lucy?”

“Lucy cut her finger on something. I have to take her into town for a tetanus shot,” Dan answered.

Lucy blinked at the improvisation, and hurriedly fisted her hand around her wounded thumb. They had reached Dan’s truck by then. He opened the passenger door and practically shoved her inside.

“Are you okay with this, Lucy?” Kenny’s face appeared at the window.

“Sure Kenny, I’m fine. Other than my finger.”

“But shouldn’t you be driving your own car? I mean how’re you gonna get back?”

“Kenny, think about it.” Dan’s voice exuded reasonableness as he climbed behind the wheel. “She’s lost blood. She could go into shock at any moment. She might even need stitches. There’s no way she should be driving.”

Lucy turned to him in exasperation. “Cavanaugh, what are you talking about? I am not gonna need stitches for a puncture wound, you idiot!”

His jaw clenched and he responded with his usual mulish stubbornness. “You might.”

“No. I won’t,” she snapped back at him, rolling her eyes at Kenny, who appeared genuinely relieved to see them getting along so poorly.

“So...you’re really okay with this?” he persisted.

“Yeah, don’t worry, Kenny.” She managed a smile for him, just before they pulled away. “I’ll be fine.”

She rounded on Dan the moment the truck cleared the parking lot. “Oh, that was real smooth, Cavanaugh. What the hell were you thinking? Stitches? A tetanus shot? Jesus! You don’t imagine he actually believed any of that shit, do you? And in case you’ve forgotten, there’s an excellent first aid kit in the office.”

“So, what’d you want me to tell him?” he grumbled as he maneuvered the truck over the winding road that led out of the canyon. “That I was taking you back to my place so I could fuck your brains out?”

For just an instant she was stunned into speechlessness. She glowered at him. “Well, gee whiz, isn’t that a turn on. I can certainly understand now why everyone says you’re so charming. Funny how I’d never noticed it before!”

He grimaced, and nodded. “You’re right. I’m sorry. That was really crude.”

“Damn straight it was. What is your problem, anyway?”

“I honestly don’t know,” he sighed, glancing over at her, apologetically. “I think maybe it’s those sexy outfits you always wear. They’ve been driving me nuts for weeks now.”

She stared at him perplexed. “What sexy outfits?”

“Well, like the one you’re wearing right now, for example,” he answered, apparently in all seriousness.

She glanced down at the tank top and shorts she was wearing—as unexceptional an outfit as any she could imagine. “This is sexy?”

He glanced over at her again, his gaze lingering a bit longer, this time. “Oh, yeah,” he answered, sounding very sincere.

Lucy frowned. “What are you my father now?”

“Trust me on this one,” he told her, returning his eyes to the road. “I am definitely not feeling at all fatherly toward you.”

They lapsed into an uneasy silence after that, and Lucy subsided against the seat, taking deep, calming breaths as she tried to figure out just what in the hell she was doing. So they were going to have sex. Big deal. It wasn’t as if she’d never done it before. Although, if the kissing were anything to go by, it might turn out to be a much bigger deal than she’d come to expect.

Which was maybe one of those good news/bad news kind of things, she figured; given the fact that he'd always acted like such a jerk, and they'd still have to work together afterwards. She refused to even consider the bigger question of why, if she really thought he was a jerk, she was contemplating doing anything at all with him.

And anyway, she knew exactly why she was doing it. She was doing it because she was curious—that's all! She just wanted to know what it would be like. And because she was tired of always feeling so awkward whenever he was around.

She'd regretted telling him he intimidated her the instant she'd confessed it, and now she needed to do something quick to regain some of the ground she'd lost. She needed to prove she was just as tough, just as cool, just as sophisticated as he was.

Still, as the ride progressed, she found herself growing more and more uncertain. This whole thing might be a huge mistake. She swallowed nervously as she shot him a quick look. His eyes were fastened on the road, and his expression was grim. What if he did turn out to be a jerk, after all? She could end up feeling even more awkward around him than she already did. But since she'd already pretty much resigned herself to the idea that she'd have to quit her job anyway...shit. She really wished he'd kiss her again. Everything had seemed so much clearer—or at least simpler—then. But he didn't, of course. And by the time they had reached his apartment the only thing stopping her from demanding that he turn around and take her right back again was her stubborn determination not ever to let him see how nervous he made her.

* * *

“So, do you want something to drink?” Dan asked from the kitchen, “Or something to eat? Or, I don't know, anything?”

“No.” Lounging in the doorway that separated the living room from the kitchen, Lucy watched as he poured some soda into a glass for himself. What the hell was he waiting for? Couldn’t they just...get on with it?

“Okay. But, you know, we’ve got all evening, now. So, d’you think you might want to listen to some music for awhile? Or maybe I could roll us a joint and we could...talk?”

He had to be kidding? The suspense was already shredding her nerves, she couldn’t possibly sit through an entire conversation waiting for him to pounce.

“Look, Cavanaugh, do you mind? I mean, we came here to screw, so let’s just do it now and get it over with, okay?”

He slammed the bottle down on the counter, and the next thing she knew he had her backed up against the doorframe. “What, you mean like right up against this wall here?” he sneered, his hands almost bruising her arms, his blue eyes practically sparking with anger. “You got no call lecturing me on charm, babe. Not if you’re gonna turn around and say something like that.”

She lifted her chin and glared back at him. “What’s this, now? A double standard? You get to say things like that, but I don’t?”

“Does everything with you have to be a contest?” He shook his head angrily. “Christ, Lucy. Can’t we even try to...I don’t know...pretend we like each other? Just a little, maybe? Maybe just for tonight?”

“Why? You really think that’s gonna change anything?” she asked challengingly.

He sighed, reaching out to tuck a loose piece of her hair back behind her ear. “I don’t know, maybe not, but...let’s just try it anyway, okay?” And then he brushed his

lips against hers, ever so lightly, and she leaned in to him, ready to kiss him back; but he was already gone. Before she knew what had happened he had scooped her up into his arms and was carrying her into the bedroom. And now her heart began to race in earnest, because this new gentleness made her more nervous than his previous aggression had.

Chapter Four

Dan carried Lucy into his bedroom and set her down on his bed. She rolled away from him immediately, propping herself up on her elbows, and watching him with dark, inscrutable eyes. He leaned down and brushed his lips against hers one more time. “I’ll be right back.”

Her eyes widened. “Why? Where are you—”

“The bathroom.” He smiled at the cautious look in her eyes. “Don’t go setting fire to the place or anything, while I’m gone, okay?”

Lucy just shrugged. “Hey, I’m not the one inventing ways to stall things here.”

Dan shook his head as he crossed the room. He closed the bathroom door behind him feeling grateful for the few minutes reprieve. She’d hit a little closer to the truth than he cared to admit with that crack about stalling; because at that moment, he was feeling a desperate need to take things as slowly as possible.

It had hit him during the ride over that this was, in all likelihood, the worst idea he’d ever, ever had. There were so many reasons why he shouldn’t get involved with her. Real good reasons, too, most of them.

She was an employee.

She was friends with his brother.

She’d just said she hated him.

And he could pretty much count on her to use any misstep he made—in the bedroom or anywhere else—as a means to discredit him at work.

None of which counted for crap when he considered how she'd practically incinerated him with a single kiss. When she'd pulled him to her, spontaneous human combustion had, all at once, seemed a whole lot less farfetched than ever before, and every rational thought he'd ever had about why he should leave her the fuck alone had gone up in flames, like dried grass in a firestorm.

The truth was, he really didn't care how bad an idea this was, he wanted her anyway. He had for weeks. Reason and logic had nothing at all to do with the way he felt. Which probably went a long way toward explaining why, so far, he'd been acting just like the asshole she obviously believed him to be.

Shit, shit, shit. Dan thunked his head against the door. He had no idea how he had gotten himself into this mess. And no great desire to get himself out of it just yet either, for that matter. But still—dear God, there had to be some way he could avoid totally messing up?

He was a great believer in atmosphere, and he had always prided himself on his ability to set the proper romantic mood. But in this case, he was doing a really lousy job. He pulled the box of condoms down from the medicine cabinet shelf and shoved a handful of packages into his pants' pocket, as he thought about that. He had almost no food in the kitchen and not a whole lot to drink, either. He had no candles, no massage oil, no incense—hell, he hadn't even bothered to make his bed this morning! Which was something he definitely would have done had he known he was bringing anyone home with him.

There were a lot of things he would have done differently had he known this was going to happen tonight. And right now, he was regretting every one. Not that he supposed it would've made much difference. However many ways there were of screwing this thing up, he'd bet anything the two of them could find 'em all.

But there was one thing he would make damn certain of, he vowed as he returned the box to its shelf and slammed the cabinet closed. No matter what it took, he would prove to her that he wasn't the jerk she thought he was. He would show her just how considerate a lover he could be. From here on in, he would be on his very best behavior. He would remember his manners. He would make it good for her. He would be gentle. And, most of all, he would take things slow. "Even if it kills me."

Which it damn well might do, he decided, when he walked back into the bedroom a few minutes later. Because while he'd been in the bathroom, trying to figure out a way to slow things down she'd been in here, taking off all her clothes in an apparent effort to speed things up. And, oh, Jesus, was this part of the undeclared war still waging between them? Because she was well on her way to winning it!

She lay on her side in his unmade bed. Completely naked now, her head propped casually on her elbow, her other arm draped along her side; she was concealing nothing from him—only the dark tangle of hair at the top of her thighs which was partially hidden by the careless curve of her leg.

He felt his heart slam up against the wall of his chest at the sight of her. Even in the low light of the shuttered room he could see she had exactly the kind of body he'd always found pretty much irresistible. Those gorgeous breasts, the sight of which had probably shorted out some parts of his brain when he'd first uncovered them, back in the greenhouse—that would account for his behavior since then—were perfectly matched by the sweet curve of her ass. And both were nicely balanced by that tiny little waist he was already itching to get his hands around again.

He could imagine it right now. How perfect it would feel to be holding her just there, as he lay on his back in the bed. Pulling her down to straddle him. Guiding her into just the rhythm he wanted.

He could imagine it a little too well. His hands were shaking as he dug the condoms back out of his pocket and dropped them on the nightstand. It was all he could do to keep from lunging for her, grabbing hold of her hips and—

“You know, if you kept those in the drawer out here, instead of in the bathroom, you'd probably save yourself loads of time,” she told him with cool impatience that, for some reason, brought to mind their earlier discussion.

Intimidated? Her? Yeah, that'll be the day. Even lying there buck naked she appeared calm, collected and almost totally indifferent to him. But then, when had she ever not?

And yet, if he were to believe her, he'd somehow been intimidating her all along.

Feeling a sudden qualm, Dan studied her face a little more closely. There was that familiar expression in her eyes. A look he'd always assumed was simply dislike, but which could also, just possibly, contain more than a hint of wariness, as well.

Abruptly, as if she'd read his mind, her expression changed. "What now?" she asked, raising her eyebrows at him. "More stalling? Don't tell me you've changed your mind?"

"Hm? Oh, no, nothing like that." He shook his head, feeling more than a little puzzled. If she really was feeling nervous, that was all the more reason for them to take things slowly, wasn't it? So then, why in the hell was she pushing him like this? "I was just thinking about something, that's all," he said, still watching her face as he shrugged out of his shirt.

"Oh yeah? So, does it usually take you this long to complete a thought?" She sounded as contemptuous as ever, but her eyes flickered away from him a little too quickly as he stepped out of his pants, and this time he was almost positive he could hear an undercurrent of nerves in her voice.

He took a moment to get himself ready, then he eased himself down on the bed beside her and slid his hand around the nape of her neck. He kissed her gently, definitely feeling her hesitancy now. It was in the faint trembling of her fingers as she settled her hand at his waist so tentatively; it was in the slight hitch of her breath, the spasm of her throat as she swallowed. He pulled back to look at her again. "Lucy--"

Something very like annoyance flashed in her eyes. "What? Why do you keep looking at me like that?" she demanded, pulling her hand away again. "How come you keep stopping? I mean, shit, I thought you wanted to do this?"

"Oh, I do," he assured her. "I definitely do. I just...I just want to make sure we do it right, is all."

"You mean there's a wrong way?" She sounded skeptical.

“Several, I’d imagine.” He leaned in to kiss her again. The ‘wrong way’ that most concerned him at that moment, involved his doing exactly what she seemed to want him to do. To rush headlong into action, seeking only his own satisfaction, completely ignoring her needs in the process. But he knew better than to give in to that impulse. He knew the price he was likely to pay for making so basic a mistake as that. Surely, she’d never give him another chance to try again.

He deepened the kiss deliberately, easing her mouth open and just barely touching her tongue with his own as he let his hand trail down to her breast. Her nipple was already hard, he could feel it against his palm as he pressed against her softness. And, oh, God, she felt just as good as he knew she would. He shifted his hand on her, trapping her nipple between his fingers, pulling on it as he kneaded and stroked her breast’s fullness for several minutes, all the while continuing to kiss her. She kissed him back with the same frenzied passion that had driven him almost out of control in the greenhouse, her breath coming faster, a tiny moan escaping past her lips as he shifted his hand again, so that now, his thumb could brush light circles over her nipple.

“Oh, God,” she gasped, tearing her mouth away from his. “Now!”

His gaze took in her flushed face, her eyes almost black with lust, and he had to struggle to restrain himself. “No. Not yet,” he whispered. He kissed her once more, as gently as he could, and then he dipped his head to take her nipple with his mouth and let his hand trail lower. He felt the muscles in her stomach jump as his fingers glided across them and her breath was a ragged, breathy sigh. Her legs parted for him and his fingers slid between them. And she was so slick and soft—like hot, buttered satin—that he teetered again on the very edge of his control, his hand clenching on her softness, his mouth sucking harder than he’d intended. Almost mindless with need until he was reeled back in by her strangled cry.

“Oh, Christ. Cavanaugh! What’re you waiting for? C’mon. Let’s just do it already!”

“Shhh!” he soothed, pulling back again, fighting for breath, forcing himself to focus on her face as his hand commenced a slow, steady stroking. Her eyes slid shut, her body arched against his hand, he watched as she bit her lip, as though she were trying to resist all the tension he could feel building inside her.

He lowered his head to her again, this time to place a kiss against the base of her throat, and then to lick that place where he could feel her pulse beating with a hard, staccato rhythm.

He heard the sharp, attenuated intake of her breath; and then her voice, “Oh, God, oh God, oh, please! Dan...please?” And he never knew, either then or later, whether it had been the pleading, almost panicked note in her voice as she said it, and the way her fingers trembled as she clutched at his shoulder that catapulted him over the edge. Or the fact that she’d finally called him by his given name. Whatever the reason, he fell in an instant, rolling on top of her with a muffled groan, his hands tightening against the backs of her thighs as he bent them back toward the mattress, and pushed himself deep inside her.

“Ohhh!” Lucy moaned loudly as her body went tight beneath him, and he couldn’t tell if it was from pleasure or shock or discomfort or some combination of the three. It didn’t matter anyway, as he could no longer stop his body from rocking into hers hard and fast, totally out of control now with wanting her.

He barely even noticed when she climaxed, though she gasped out his name again and again, as her body shuddered and clenched, because at almost the same moment he was thrusting himself inside her one last time. His hands clutching at her hips, holding her as tight as he could against him, roaring his own release as he came.

As Dan’s brain seeped slowly back, he had only one thought: A heartfelt prayer of thanks that he held it together as long as he had. Maybe he hadn’t made a complete mess of things. She had come, anyway. And, hopefully, it had been good enough for her that she would want to do it again. He pressed a kiss against her forehead, and then eased himself out of her, rolling to the side to get rid of the condom, and then rolling back to gather her into his arms.

She was uncharacteristically silent. *Well, that's probably okay*, he thought contentedly; he didn't feel much like talking himself.

But a moment later she cleared her throat, and he felt disappointment seize him when she said, a little too brightly. "Well, I uh, I guess I'd better be leaving now, huh?"

"What?" Dan stared at her in dismay. He could not believe his ears. That was it, then? She wanted to leave? Already?

She cleared her throat again. "Yeah, well...I mean...I don't know how long it would take me to *actually* get a tetanus shot, or anything, you know? But I think we're probably a little behind schedule already and—"

"Lucy, please, don't go yet. Stay the night with me. I know we can do better."

She gaped at him then, and his heart sank further as he read the naked disbelief in her face. "Y-you think so?" she asked so skeptically that he felt his anger rise.

"Yes, I think so," he snapped. "In fact, if you hadn't been rushing me—" he broke off, struggling for a lighter tone. "Hey, the way I look at it, after all the chances I've given you to do things your way at work, you at least owe me one more chance to get this right, don't you think?"

"What did you say? I owe you? Are you actually-- What?" her voice squeaked in outrage, and he was immediately sorry. Okay, not the best time to make jokes.

"I'm only kidding, Lucy. But please," he coaxed, stroking his hands down her back. "Don't leave so soon. Let's try it again, okay? I promise I'll make it better for you next time."

"Better?" She stared at him doubtfully. "Better than...than that?"

"I swear it," he whispered in her ear, as his teeth closed gently on her earlobe.

She inhaled sharply. “I uh...well...I guess...but, I’ll have to use your phone?”

“Sure. Anything. Whatever you want.” He sighed in relief, relaxing his grip on her slightly. She shot him one last doubtful look, and then, rolling out of his arms, sat up and reached for the phone.

Dan waited, and listened, growing more and more uneasy as Lucy made two phone calls. The first was to her parent’s home, where she left a message claiming she’d be spending the night with someone named Marsha. The second call was to Marsha herself, asking her to cover for her, in the event her parents called for her there.

“Just...how old are you anyway?” he couldn’t help asking, when she’d finally turned back towards him.

She looked surprised. “I just turned twenty. Why?”

“It’s just-- Well, you’re obviously hiding the fact that you’re here with me. Is it because your parents wouldn’t approve of your getting involved with someone you’re working for? Or because of your age? Or what?”

She laughed. “My parents? I mean, you do want to go on breathing, right? Work has nothing to do with it. In fact, *you* have nothing to do with it, really. Other than, yeah, they probably would think you were taking advantage of me, come to think of it. And they probably wouldn’t be too thrilled about that, either. But it’s the idea of me having sex—at all, with anyone, ever—that they don’t like, I think.”

She shook her head. “Anyway, they’re still pissed off at me for some stuff that happened back when I was in high school, so they don’t exactly approve of anything I do anymore.”

“But that was like—what? Two years ago? Three?”

She looked amused. “Forgive and forget is not exactly a concept we’re particularly big on. We’re more into remember and retaliate, I think.”

“Real catchy little family motto you’ve got there,” he said with a grimace.

She shrugged. “What can I say? You know, it’d probably sound better in Latin, or something.”

“You think ? Hmm, let’s see...maybe...memini et multo ? Nah, I think I like the English version better.”

“You know Latin?” She sounded surprised. Then she shook her head, “Oh, right. Of course you’d know Latin.”

He looked at her curiously. “Why of course?”

“Oh, well, it’s just that everyone at work always talks about how smart you are,” she said with another shrug.

“Oh, I doubt that everyone does,” he couldn’t help pointing out. “Far as I can tell you’ve got better than half the staff thinking I’m totally incompetent.”

“I have them thinking that?” She scowled and then, just as he was about to apologize for his phrasing, she grimaced and added, “Yeah I guess maybe...that could be partly my fault, huh? I suppose I haven’t exactly made things easy for you.”

Her admission took him by surprise. “Look,” he told her, stroking his fingers through her hair and frowning slightly as he felt her pull back, ever so subtly, away from his touch. “To tell you the truth, I don’t really care what most of them think about me anyway. But with you it’s different.”

“Oh, yeah? Why’s that?” she asked, pulling away even more.

“I don’t know,” he said, sighing as he reluctantly dropped his hand from her hair.
“It just is, that’s all. But let’s not talk about work any more, right now. Okay?”

“Okay,” she agreed, and then added, with a nervous little laugh. “You uh...you wouldn’t happen to have anything to eat around here, would you? I’m feeling kinda hungry, all of a sudden.”

He’d smiled at that. Food and sex. Just about his all time favorite combination.
This time, for sure, he’d get it right.

Chapter Five

Dan was a big guy, and Lucy expected him to have a big appetite. The Lord knew she was feeling absolutely famished after the afternoon's exertion. So when she followed him into his kitchen, the very last things she expected to see him pulling out of his refrigerator were what appeared to be the makings of a salad.

He was wearing nothing but a pair of blue plaid boxers, and although it wasn't the first time she was seeing his broad, bronzed chest, or the powerful muscles in his shoulders and arms, the sight gave her an odd, hollow feeling in the pit of her stomach. *Probably just hunger*, she told herself, determinedly pushing the dangerous idea that it could be due to anything else to the back of her mind.

He looked up as she entered the room, and when his glance took in the fact that she was wearing his shirt, he smiled--with entirely too much smug satisfaction, she thought as she frowned in response. Even despite what they'd just gotten finished doing, she didn't exactly feel comfortable with the intimacy that borrowing his clothing implied. But she hadn't been able to see the point of getting dressed again, either--not when she was only going to take her clothes back off a short while later. Nor had she liked the idea of parading around his apartment in her underwear, as he was doing. So it had seemed, at the time she made her choice, like the least evil of her options.

Until she'd put the damn thing on and the scent of him clinging to the fabric made her go weak in the knees.

She'd had to sit right back down on the edge of his bed while she buttoned it. Her heart thundering in her ears, her mind dizzy with thoughts of all the things his hands and mouth had done to her.

Still scowling, she gestured at the cluttered countertop. "What's all this?"

"Dinner." He motioned her towards one of the stools pushed beneath the breakfast bar. "Here. Sit down."

She surveyed the platter he'd arranged on the counter. "Are you a vegetarian or something?" It wasn't like she had anything against it, but he sure didn't seem like the type.

Dan grimaced. "No, I'm not. But I wasn't exactly planning on entertaining anyone here tonight, either. So we're just gonna have to make do with what I've got on hand. Okay?" He'd picked up a slice of avocado as he spoke, and now he held it out to her.

"Yeah, sure. Whatever," she said as she reached for it, but he pulled it away from her hand.

"Uh-uh." He shook his head, a tiny smile just teasing the corners of his mouth. "Not like that. Open up."

Lucy felt her stomach tense. He had to be kidding? He wanted to feed it to her? She frowned at him again, but his smile didn't waver and his eyes held a challenge she couldn't back away from. Reluctantly, she opened her mouth and he gently slid the slippery green-gold chunk inside. It was perfectly ripened, soft and buttery, with just a hint of balsamic vinegar. Her taste buds—traitorous little beasts who couldn't care less how the food got to them, it seemed—immediately went into ecstasy.

“Good?” he asked popping a piece into his own mouth.

“Mm,” she murmured, non-committally. She helped herself to another piece.

“Here, try the tomatoes next.” He picked up a tiny orange cherry tomato, and once again held it inches from her mouth. Lucy sighed, and rolled her eyes, but this time she opened her mouth for him just a little more willingly. The tomato was also delicious, and just slightly warm, as if it still retained some trace of sunshine. She bit down on it and it burst inside her mouth with a rush of flavor.

The second tomato was as good as the first, but this time, instead of popping it into her mouth he brushed it back and forth across her lower lip teasingly, until she grew impatient and took it between her teeth and tugged it free of his fingers. She smiled at him, triumphant at having beaten him at his own game. But Dan was smiling too, as if she’d done exactly as he’d wanted her to. His blue eyes gleamed wickedly, and she felt her breath go as she caught sight of the heat that smoldered there. She was no longer certain she understood the rules they were playing by.

“My turn,” she announced recklessly, picking up a tomato and dangling it in front of his face. He leaned forward and took it into his mouth. His lips and tongue briefly caressed her fingertips. A tiny tremor ran through her at the touch and she felt a flush of heat spread across her face.

When he turned to remove something from the oven, Lucy took the opportunity to gather her wits; slipping another piece of avocado into her mouth with trembling fingers.

The rest of the meal went much the same way. They fed each other from the wheel of melted Brie that Dan had heated in the oven. The soft cheese stuck to their fingers and had to be scraped away with their teeth, as well as their tongues. A surprisingly time consuming process, Lucy discovered, and one which left her fingers tingling from his touch. Next, he'd produced artichokes dripping with melted butter and firm, briny, black olives; sweet peppered pecans, and last of all, a whole can of smoked oysters. All of it washed down with several glasses of a locally produced Cabernet that was deeply dark, almost earthy in flavor, with an elusive cedar scent. It tasted like a summer night in a pine forest, Lucy thought, feeling dizzy after a couple of glasses.

For dessert, Dan brought out fresh strawberries. When those were almost finished, he suddenly remembered the can of whipped cream that was supposed to have accompanied them.

"Well, no sense in letting it go to waste, huh?" he said, after the berries had all been eaten, "Let's just take it back to bed with us."

Lucy frowned. "You don't really want to eat that in bed, do you?" she protested, trying to free her mind from the warm drowsiness the food and wine had produced. "It sounds awfully messy,"

"Well, we'll just have to be sure we clean up after ourselves then, won't we?" Dan answered with a sly smile, tugging at her hand and leading the way back to his bedroom.

*

They stretched out together on the bed and in between kisses Dan amused himself by squirting whipped cream first into his mouth and then into hers.

“All right, Cavanaugh,” Lucy sighed, after this had gone on for awhile, “Don’t you think we’ve had about enough to eat now?”

“Nope.” He grinned at her, and then threaded his fingers through her hair, using it to turn her head just slightly to the side, holding her there while he leaned in to kiss her again, lightly. “As a matter of fact, we’re just getting started.”

And then, before she had any clue what he was planning, he’d sprayed whipped cream all the way down the side of her neck. She gasped as the cool cream hit her skin. Her heart began beating so quick and hard it was almost painful, and her eyes drifted shut as he lowered his mouth to her throat and slowly licked and kissed his way down her neck, leaving a trail of cool, damp, shivering skin in his wake. He reached her collar, gently tugged it open, and licked across her collarbone.

She was so focused on the feel of his mouth, she hadn’t noticed that his fingers had been busy at the buttons of her shirt until he’d pushed it aside, and laid a second strip of whipped cream from shoulder to throat.

He worked his way even more slowly back across this line. Using his teeth again, as well as his lips and tongue, to remove all the cream from her skin, shifting to sit astride her as he did, using the weight of his body to lower her back onto the mattress. Finally, he reached her shoulder and sat up, trapping her beneath him as he peeled back the folds of her shirt. His gaze wandered over her, she felt her nipples grow hard. She shivered at the thoughtful, slightly devilish look on his face as he shook the can of whipped cream back and forth with an easy, almost hypnotic motion. And all the while a slow smile was creeping its way across his mouth.

He raised his gaze finally, to lock eyes with her, and she stared back at him; her body flushed with heat, her mind dazed by it. Still taking his time, his eyes hardly leaving her face, he very deliberately covered the tips of both breasts with slow, spiraling swirls of cold foam. She gasped and nearly went blind at the touch, arching her back and clutching him to her as he licked one nipple clean, and then drew it into his mouth to suck on it. Then he slowly slid his mouth across to her other breast. She heard herself moan as he took the whole of its cream covered peak into his mouth, as well; and drove her to within inches of madness with his tongue.

A moment later she felt his mouth leave her. Lucy opened her eyes just in time to see him lowering the can towards her navel. Frantically, she wrestled her mind back and grabbed for the can.

“My turn,” she rasped as she pushed herself up onto her knees.

Dan smiled and rolled obligingly onto his back, propping himself up on his elbows and gazing at her expectantly. She took a deep breath. Her fingers trembled a little as she pressed the nozzle and the white, foamy cream squirted across his jaw line. Bracing one hand on his shoulder, she leaned in to lick it off, reveling in the unexpected contrast in textures between the soft sweetness of the cream and the stubble of beard beneath it. Taking her time to enjoy the feel, and the faint salt tang of his skin, she wiped the last of the whipped cream from just below his earlobe with a series of quick, deliberately ticklish flicks of her tongue. Then she pulled back to apply some more to the base of his throat.

His hand slid up the back of her bare thigh and she shivered at his touch, pressing her lips harder against his neck to feel the pounding of his pulse. Loving the way it picked up speed as she ran her tongue back and forth across it. She followed up with more cream. First tracing a line down the center of his chest, and then drawing a circle around one of his nipples. She took her time licking both areas clean again, stalling for as long as she could manage as she racked her brain for more ideas. She could guess what he had in mind to do if he got control of the can again, and the thought of it made her almost more nervous than she could stand.

She licked the last bit of cream from around his nipple and sat back on her heels to consider her options, biting her lip and doing her best to ignore both the panicky twisting sensation in her gut and the smug amusement on his face.

“Are you done with that now?” he inquired, his polite tone totally failing to mask the threat of mischief in his voice.

“No!” She jerked the can out of his reach as another nervous thrill shot through her. “Not yet.” But still she hesitated, her eyes sliding up and down his torso as she wondered where to go from here.

“Well, then, are you planning on using it anytime soon? Because if you’re not—” Once again Dan reached for the can, and once again she pulled it away.

“You think I won’t do it, don’t you?” she demanded, staring at him with a boldness she was far from feeling.

“Oh, no way, babe,” he chuckled, as he smilingly called her bluff. “But on the other hand, I just keep hoping.”

Swallowing hard, she grabbed the waistband of his shorts then, and pulled them down. The movement caused his penis to spring out of his pants and she heard the sharp intake of his breath as the soft skin of it brushed against her knuckles.

It was fully erect. Long and dark and hard, it looked absolutely massive to her. She swallowed again. She had never done anything remotely like this before and she had no idea how to proceed. Moments accumulated as she stared indecisively at his erection.

“Ah, well...I guess maybe it’s my turn again after all,” he said after a while, sounding ever so slightly regretful. She glanced at his face and he smiled back at her with such tender amusement in his eyes that she couldn’t help but feel more confident.

“Uh-uh,” she murmured, shaking her head and managing a small smile of her own. She stared him down and pressed the nozzle. Cream shot wildly from the can and splattered across an area that stretched from the tops of his thighs to just below his navel. She heard his startled gasp as she turned to stare in panic at the mess she’d created.

He laughed. “Oh, wow. Interesting technique. You, uh, certainly have your work cut out for you now though, don’t you?”

He was laughing at her? For an instant she considered hurling the can at his head. But when she turned to glare at him, his expression was so comical that her anger evaporated again.

She dropped the can on the bed, tossed her hair back behind her shoulders, and braced her hands on her knees. “Yeah, well, what can I say? I like a challenge.”

“Huh. Like I hadn’t already guessed that,” he replied.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Are you complaining about something, Cavanaugh?”

“No, no, not in the least.” He smiled, folding his hands behind his head and relaxing back on the bed. “Go right ahead, babe. I’m all yours. Knock yourself out.”

She took a deep breath and began; licking her way cautiously across the near side of his abdomen and then down along one thigh. His skin quivered slightly. His hair tickled her lips.

Dan raised his head to watch her as she maneuvered herself across his legs and began on his other thigh. “So you’re like, uh...saving the best for last, are you?” His words were casual, his tone was anything but.

She shot him another look. His eyes were dark and more than halfway closed and he was breathing more quickly than before. “That sounded like another complaint,” she said lowering her head again, and delivering a quick, gentle nip to the inside of his thigh.

She heard the breath leave his lungs in a rush and he dropped his head back on the bed, “Oh, Jesus,” he half groaned, half laughed, “Definitely not complaining!” And she had to bite her own lip to keep from laughing, as well.

Gradually, and only a little awkwardly, she worked her way up and over the other side of his abdomen, acquiring several smears of cream across her chest in the process, but finally most of the whipped cream had been removed from his body. All that remained were the soft ripples, melting from the heat of his skin, that still coated his penis. She stared at it doubtfully. If anything, it seemed to have gotten larger in the last few minutes. But he had raised his head again to watch her, and there was no way she could back out now. Not without admitting to either her nervousness or her lack of experience.

She leaned across him and cautiously ran her tongue up the length of him and over the tip.

Dan moaned softly. “Oh, yeah. Just like that.”

Emboldened, she made another pass, marveling at how velvety soft and smooth his skin was. A shudder ran through him and his penis jerked convulsively as her tongue slid over it for the third time; and then she shuddered herself as she tasted not just the cream this time, but something exotically, intrinsically male. Startled, she pulled back. He reached out one hand to her head, his fingers clenching in her hair and she caught her breath, close to panic with the thought that he would try and force her to continue, but though his fingers flexed repeatedly against her scalp, he exerted no pressure.

“Oh, please,” he breathed, when she continued to hesitate. “Please, Lucy. Just-- oh, honey, please; just a little more.”

She leaned back in and took the head of his penis into her mouth then, sucking it softly for several minutes as she ran the tip of her tongue along the ridge.

His hand had slid out of her hair to rest on her shoulder. When at last she raised her head and turned to look at him, he reached both hands down to haul her up on top of him, pressing his mouth to her chest as he kissed away the whipped cream smeared there. He kept one hand flat on her back, under the shirt, holding her against him, while with his other hand he wrestled the garment off her arms, and tossed it to the floor.

He slid her back down along his body and took her mouth with his own as if he were starving for the taste of her. His tongue licking into her mouth, his hands sliding over her back, touching her everywhere, ignited a restless, hungering need within her as well. She clenched her hands in his hair and kissed him back desperately as he rolled them both over on the bed and stretched himself out on top of her.

Dan slid his mouth along her cheek and down along the line of her jaw. “Ah, girl,” he sighed, “Do you know how long I’ve been wanting to do this with you?”

She shook her head, almost beyond words. “No. How long?” she gasped, not really caring except...he’d thought about doing this? With her? Really?

He laughed weakly and continued to kiss her throat as he answered. “Ohhh, since about five seconds after I first set eyes on you, I think.”

“Huh?” She frowned in confusion. “But I thought—I thought you hated me, then?”

Abruptly his mouth stopped moving. He lifted his head. “Lucy,” he said, frowning back at her, “You knew damn well I didn’t hate you.” She opened her mouth to argue that she certainly had not known anything of the sort, but he shook his head impatiently and cut her off with a quick kiss. “Never mind that now. And if I ever said or did anything to give you that impression, then I apologize.” Then he kissed her again, a long, slow, lingering kiss, this time. “I don’t hate you Lucy,” he murmured against her lips, “far from it.”

“Oh. Okay,” she whispered back, as he began to work his way back down her throat. His mouth trailed little, nibbling kisses all the way down her chest and up the slope of her breast. She felt his mouth close on her nipple and she closed her eyes and arched into him.

“So,” he murmured softly, a moment later, “What about you?”

“What about me?” she gasped, struggling to make sense of his question.

“Well, you did say, earlier today, that you hated my guts,” he reminded, lightly teasing the tip of her breast with his tongue. “You don’t really feel that way about me, do you?”

Did she? “Oh. Umm...well, maybe not.”

“Maybe not!” Dan raised his head and laughed down at her. His eyes were sparkling and his teeth were gleaming and his whole face was alive with humor.

Lucy stared at him, distracted. Dear Lord. How had she ever missed seeing what a great smile he had? She was noticing it now, all right. Jeez. A *really* great smile.

“Lucy? Maybe not?”

“Well, no—I mean...not...not right now, anyway. At least, I, I,” she stammered to a stop as his smile grew wider and even more lovely, and she felt her heart begin to melt.

He raised his eyebrows. “Oh, I see. So, I guess I’d better keep on doing what I’m doing then, is that it?” He leaned down to kiss her other breast and her eyes slid shut as waves of heat began to lap at her senses.

“Dan,” she whispered when she felt him moving again, a few minutes later; and then “Ohhh, yes. Yes!” as she felt his hands gently part her thighs. Her heart pounded in anticipation.

Expecting to feel the heat of him thrusting inside her, she was in no way prepared for the icy blast of whipped cream between her legs. Her eyes flew open and she blinked at him in dumb surprise. Every sense she possessed was thrown into such immediate and total chaos, she could not remember how to breathe, much less speak.

He appeared not to notice her distress, as he smiled down at her in satisfaction. “Now, you see there? That’s the way I like to do this. Concentrate on one key area at a time. Not that I didn’t thoroughly enjoy your approach too, babe.”

“Omigod,” she whispered when she’d gotten her breath back. “You, you, you...” her voice trailed away again as something else registered. He’d buried her beneath such a thick cloud of whipped cream that it was going to take him a long time to remove it all. A very long time. She felt a shudder run through her as she watched him lower himself between her legs, and then she panicked. “Wait!” She pushed herself up on one elbow and put out her other hand to stop him. “No. Don’t—”

“What’s wrong?” he asked, pausing with his head cocked to the side, a dangerous smile hovering on his lips. “You’re not afraid I might decide to pay you back for biting me...are you?”

Acutely aware of her vulnerability, she was stunned into silence by his remark. Did he mean it? Half sprawled on her back, his hands clasping her thighs—she doubted she’d even make it off the bed before he caught her and-- “You wouldn’t!” she gasped, scowling furiously.

His face turned instantly serious. “Hey, easy there, babe,” he said, lightly stroking his fingers along her leg. “Relax. It was just a joke.” A worried frown creased his forehead. “C’mon now, you know I wouldn’t do anything to hurt you.”

She shook her head, emphatically. “I don’t care. I don’t think I want you to—”

“Aw, c’mon, Lucy,” he interrupted, placing several soft kisses on the inside of her knee and halfway up her thigh. “Don’t be that way. I promise I’ll be gentle. Trust me.”

The last few words were whispered just inches above her skin. She caught her lower lip between her teeth and stared at him as his warm breath and soft kisses caused all her nerves to tingle.

“I’m sorry if I scared you, Luce,” he said, sighing just a little. He leaned his head against her thigh and gazed at her ruefully. “I didn’t mean to, honest. I was just having a little fun with you.”

Ha! You didn’t scare me, she wanted to scoff, but what was the point? He had, and they both knew it. And she just didn’t have it in her to keep up the pretense, anyway. Not with the warm weight of his head resting on her leg, the cool softness of his hair, the smooth curve of his cheek.

This feels so good, she thought, irrelevantly. And then stopped to wonder why that should be? She could think of no reason why she should feel even slightly comfortable around him and yet--

He was obviously having a very strange effect on her. All night long he’d been acting as if he had every right to touch her any way he wanted to. And she had let him. She had done things with him she hadn’t ever even thought about doing with anyone else and, except for the occasional nervousness, she’d enjoyed all of it.

She'd enjoyed it a lot.

He was still waiting and watching her with a wistful little smile on his face. His eyes were soft and warm and...kind, she decided at last. He had to have the kindest eyes she'd ever seen, as well as the most beautiful. She could feel the whipped cream between her legs beginning to melt now; trickling and dripping between the folds of her flesh, but all the same, seeming even colder than it had before. And she realized with a sense of shock, that a part of her was longing to feel the warmth of his mouth right there. To chase away the chill, to be sure, but even more, just for the feel of him, his lips, his tongue--

No matter that another part of her found the whole idea almost unbearably intimate.

"Do you really want me to stop now?" His voice was gentle and she knew he would understand if she said yes.

She stared at him a moment more, and then—still not completely certain she trusted him, but so wanting to—she shook her head.

His face cleared at once. His eyes glowed warmly. Ever so slowly he lowered his mouth to her and she eased herself back onto the bed, closed her eyes, and gave herself over to his care.

It felt even better than she imagined it would.

He was as gentle as he had promised he'd be. So gentle. And so slow and careful and deliberate that the very gentleness was a torment in itself. As his tongue forged slow, careful paths through the cream, she found herself mesmerized by the shifting sensations of coolness and warmth, only gradually becoming aware of another type of heat building and coiling and pooling within her.

"Oh, God," she gasped, as she raised her head to tell him...something. "I don't...I want...but...oh, *please!*" There were no words for what she was trying to say, or maybe she just couldn't find them.

"It's okay," he answered, raising his head briefly to return her gaze. His eyes were dark, intense; his breathing was almost as labored as her own. "Don't hold back. I want to watch you come."

Lucy's mind went incandescent at the thought, and even more heat flared in her face. "Oh, God," she gasped again, as his fingers slithered through the cool cream, sliding straight into the heart of all her heat. And then she cried out for a third time as her muscles clamped down hard around his fingers and sensations more exquisite than any she had ever known pulsed through her.

Before the tremors had completely died away, she felt his fingers sliding out of her. As he moved away, she fought to sit up; desperate to find him, to pull him back down to her, to make him touch her like that again. He was struggling with a condom. She touched his arm and he turned around, his face strained and bleak. "No...not yet. Don't—" he gasped, reaching for her then, lowering her back to the bed, kissing her frantically and murmuring, "Please...I can't wait any longer...I have to have you, Lucy. Now."

“Yes!” she whispered back, wrapping herself around him and holding him tight as he thrust himself inside her. “Oh, yes.”

She felt the heat and tension begin to build again almost immediately and she groaned with pleasure to feel him pounding into her, so hard and slick and fast. The perfect rhythm never faltering, pushing her closer and closer and closer to that now familiar edge. And she clutched him even more tightly as, once again, waves of pure pleasure crashed over her.

“Lucy...oh, Jesus. Ohhh,” he groaned a moment later. His body shuddered in her arms and he collapsed on top of her.

“Oh, my Gawd that felt good,” Lucy sighed a few moments later, her body felt so sated she was practically giddy with it. She slid her thighs up and down alongside his hips, just to feel the smooth slide of skin on skin. “It felt sooo good!”

He lifted his head to stare at her.

“What?” she asked, a little puzzled by the weary, amused expression on his face. “Something wrong?”

Dan shook his head. “No, nothing,” he chuckled, as he pushed himself off of her. “Nothing at all.” He sat up to remove his condom, and then lay back down, and pulled her close. “Ah, God,” he sighed, as he wrapped his arms around her. “Lucy Greco, you are something special. You know that?”

She was touched and pleased by the compliment, but just a little embarrassed as to how to respond, since neither ‘thank you’ nor ‘so are you’ seemed adequate, and her mind was quickly losing power as lethargy took claim of her.

“Yeah, I bet you say that to all the girls,” she tried to joke, but her voice dropped below a mumble before the words could get out of her mouth.

“Huh? What d’you say, babe?” he yawned, as he snuggled her closer.

“Isn’t...? You know, what they always,” she tried, breaking off to yawn herself, her eyes closing as her brain shut down, taking everything with it. “S’what they all say.” She managed at last, no longer able to remember what she had been trying to say in the first place, as she pitched headfirst into a deep, exhausted sleep.

Chapter Six

Dan woke up early the next morning. He lay quietly for a while, just watching Lucy as she slept; tousled hair partially obscuring her face, the pale morning sunlight slanting through the slats of the blinds illuminating her features. She looked lovely, he thought; lovely, sweet, more vulnerable than he'd ever thought possible. And altogether irresistible.

When he'd finally fallen asleep, it was with his arm curved around her, and her back nestled against his chest. But she'd turned in the night, and now she was curled towards him, the pink tips of her breasts just brushing his arm, one of her hands resting against his chest, the other lightly clasping his thigh. He felt his body grow heavy and hard as he thought of all the things he still wanted to do to her.

But it wasn't his desire to make love to her, over and over again that worried him. It was the other need raging inside him that did that. The need to lay claim to her, in every way possible. That remark of hers last night, *that's what they all say*, had rankled far more than he wanted it to.

All?

His mind had balked at the idea then, and was still balking. What all? He didn't want there to be an all. Hell, he didn't want there to be anyone for her but him. He'd lain awake for what seemed like hours after she'd fallen asleep gnawing away at the thought, like a dog with a bone. Reflexively. Repeatedly. Obsessively. But without any real hope of significantly reducing it.

He reached out a hand to move one lock of dark hair from her face and she stirred. Suddenly, the early morning sunlight was glimmering in eyes the color of fallen leaves, drowned beneath the clear water of a forest pool.

Dan caught his breath and then found himself reciting in a voice barely above a whisper, "*She walks in Beauty, like the night of cloudless climes and starry skies; and all that's best of dark and bright meet in her aspect and her eyes.*"

Lucy blinked, and looked startled. "What was that?" she asked curiously.

"Byron," he answered, then added grudgingly, "But I suppose everyone always tells you how beautiful your eyes are, too?"

She shook her head and yawned. "Nope, I think that's probably another first for me. Do you uh...do you always recite poetry this early in the morning?"

He shrugged. "Not usually. Though, to tell you the truth, that wasn't the first poem that came to my mind this morning, either."

"Yeah? So what was?"

He pushed the rest of her hair out of her face and smiled at her, feeling suddenly just a little sheepish. "*I dreamed this mortal part of mine was metamorphosed to a vine; which crawling one and every way, enthralled my dainty Lucia,*" he recited.

She giggled, and her eyes slid downward for a moment. "A vine, huh? Is that all of it?"

“No, that’s just the start. *Me thought her long small legs and thighs I with my tendrils did surprise; her belly, buttocks, and her waist by now soft nervelets were embraced...*and it goes on and on until; *But when I crept with leaves to hide those parts, which maids keep unespied, such fleeting pleasures there I took, that with the fancy I awoke; and found (Ah me!) this flesh of mine more like a stock, than like a vine.*”

She laughed out loud, then. “Very nice. But, is that—that’s not a real poem, is it?”

“Mm-hmm. By Robert Herrick,” he murmured, burying his nose in her hair to breathe in the scent of her. “It’s called The Vine, appropriately enough.”

“Huh. And it was really about someone named Lucia? So you didn’t even have to change the name this time, or anything, did you? That was very smooth, Cavanaugh. I’m impressed.”

He drew back to look at her. “This time? What--you think reciting poetry like this is part of some routine I use to seduce women?”

“Well, isn’t it?” she asked softly, her mouth curved upward, her eyes met his, dark and unfathomable.

“No, this is just for you,” he answered, wishing he knew better where he stood with her, but not knowing how to ask. He’d already tried once, the night before, but all she would admit to then was to maybe not hating him as long as he was kissing and fondling her. Which, while it wasn’t exactly bad news, was hardly as encouraging as he’d hoped.

“So...you’re saying you’re not trying to seduce me then?”

He didn’t answer right away, and her brows drew together.

“Is something wrong, Dan?”

He shook his head. “It’s just...I don’t know if I have the energy for any kind of seduction this morning, but all the same—God, I do want you.”

Lucy’s lips quirked. “Oh. Well, that’s okay, isn’t it? I mean, I want you, too, you know.”

“Do you?” he asked, stroking his hand down her arm and pulling her close.

“Uh-huh.” She slid her arms up around his neck, stretching a little as she snuggled closer. And then she smiled at him. A real smile this time. The first she’d ever given him. With no hesitancy, no reluctance, no resistance there at all.

Dan felt all the air leave his lungs. His heart lurched. “Lucy?”

“Mm?” she murmured absently as she brushed her lips across his.

A shudder ran through him. He felt her breasts pressed against his chest, her nipples hard again. His arms tightened around her. She kissed him harder, and once again, he felt all his restraint go up in flames. He kissed her back, turning with her in his arms, until he was on top of her.

She wrapped her legs around him, arched into him, he broke off their kiss on a ragged breath. “Wait. Condom,” he gasped, leaning across her to snag a package off the nightstand.

She bit him lightly on the shoulder. “Hurry,” she whispered.

Dan groaned. She was still rushing him, and this time he had no strength to resist. He did try not to run completely amuck, though; deliberately easing himself into her as carefully as he could. But she was already wet for him and his first thrust put him deep inside her. He heard her shuddering gasp of approval, and he knew there was just no way he could take things slowly this morning.

In what seemed like no time at all, he felt himself building to a climax. “Oh, God...Lucy, come on, please,” he urged, his voice a hoarse, croaking, garbled noise that barely sounded like words to his own ears, and was obviously no more comprehensible to her.

“Hu-uh?” she gazed up at him, blankly. She was close, he knew, but not close enough. He clutched her convulsively as his orgasm blew through him, groaning just a little as he heard her soft cry of disappointment, and felt her hold on him relax.

As soon as he could move, he slid one hand between their bodies and found her clitoris with his fingers, sighing in relief as he felt her body grow tense again. He stroked her over and over until at last she gave a small shriek and went altogether rigid, her muscles clamping hard, hard, hard around his sex.

“Everything okay, there?” he asked when they’d both gotten their breaths back. If the truth be told, he’d been a little startled by that shriek.

She shot him an amused glance as she pushed the hair out of her face. “Mm-hm. Very okay. But...oh, God, what time is it, anyway?”

Dan looked at the clock and groaned. “Late. We gotta get to work.”

“Yeah? Well, before we do that, we have to stop by my friend’s house. It’s bad enough that everyone’s gonna know my car was out there all night. There’s no way I’m showing back up at work in the same clothes I wore yesterday, too.”

He bit back the reply that sprang to his lips. He wanted to argue that it didn’t matter what she wore, that no one would even notice—knowing full well that everyone would and, God help him, wanting them to.

He wanted to talk her out of changing her clothes, and maybe out of showering, too, while he was at it. He wanted to take her back to work looking just like she did right now, with her mouth swollen and her face flushed and her hair wild. So everyone would know exactly what they’d been doing.

And so everyone would get the message, loud and clear. She was his now. Absolutely his. No matter how she happened to feel about it, or about him this morning. He nuzzled her neck and struggled against the juvenile impulse to plant the biggest, darkest, most obvious hickey right there, where no one could possibly miss seeing it. To mark her in as unmistakable and primitive a manner as he could think of.

“Don’t. Please, don’t,” she whispered just as he’d pressed his mouth to her throat.

He lifted his head to look at her. Had she guessed his intentions, he wondered, a little guiltily.

“We’ll never get to work, if you start that again,” she said. But her eyes were heavy lidded and her voice was husky and half hopeful, and he felt his spirits rise. Maybe she wasn’t quite so indifferent after all.

“Maybe I don’t want to go just yet,” he told her, and watched her blink in confusion.

She frowned. “But, you just said— Dan, what about work?”

“Maybe I don’t care about that, either.”

She stared at him then, clearly puzzled. “Huh? Of course you do. Why are you acting like this? This is crazy.”

“Tell me you don’t hate me,” he demanded, changing tactics.

“What?” She started and colored and he bent his head again, running his tongue along the edge of her ear.

“You can either tell me...or...you can show me,” he breathed in her ear, heard her breath go, felt her squirm beneath him.

“Stop that!” she gasped.

“It’s your choice.” He slid a hand up to cup her breast. “But, one way or another—”

“Okay, okay,” she gasped again, pushing at him. “Jeez...I don’t...Christ, I don’t hate you. I don’t, all right? Now let me go.”

“That’s all I wanted,” he told her as he lifted himself away from her, but he knew he was lying. He wanted a whole lot more from her than that, but he was smart enough to know he wasn’t going to get it just then.

Chapter Seven

After they showered, Dan drove them to a small garden apartment complex on the edge of town, and followed Lucy up the stairs to her friend's apartment. A red haired young woman with weary green eyes answered the door. She wore a brightly patterned kimono and a slightly bemused expression. A curly haired infant fussed in her arms.

"Lucy? What are you doing here?" the woman asked, her eyebrows rising in surprise.

Lucy gave the baby a kiss and the woman a quick hug as she pushed past them. "Sorry to barge in on you like this Marsha," she called over her shoulder as she disappeared into another room. "I just need to borrow some clothes."

Marsha shrugged. "Yeah, okay. Sure, take whatever you want."

"Hi, I'm Dan," he told her, extending his hand, when she turned puzzled eyes to gaze at him.

"Dan?" She stared at him oddly as they shook hands, a small smile flickered across her lips. "Wait a minute, you're not-? Oh, *really*? How very interesting." She raised her voice a little. "Uh, Luce? Is there something you want to tell me about?"

"No!" Lucy's voice floated back to them. "Nothing. This is not what you think."

"Oh, yes it is," Dan muttered, feeling a little angry that she either didn't think so, or didn't want anyone else to think so. Marsha smiled sympathetically.

"So, Marsha, how're you feeling today?" Lucy called again from the other room.

Marsha jostled the baby in her arms and sighed. “Well, my eyes are still giving me trouble, but other than that I’m okay.”

“Uh-huh. And what’d the doctors say it was this time?” Lucy asked as she reappeared, tucking a tie-dyed T-shirt into a pair of khaki shorts that she’d rolled at the waist so that they rode low on her hips.

God, she looks hot, Dan thought, his head suddenly full of images of stripping those clothes off her again and taking her back to bed. Or, forget bed. It was a nice day, maybe they could stop in one of the fields on their way to work. He had a blanket in the truck....

“Oh, just the usual,” Marsha sighed again. “That there’s nothing wrong. That it’s all in my head. That I--” she broke off suddenly; looking surprised, shaking her head as if she’d been distracted. Frowning, she shot a sharp, suspicious glance in Dan’s direction, before turning to Lucy again. “Why is it you always look better in my clothes than I do?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Lucy scoffed. “I do not. We’re still on for tonight, right?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Marsha answered absently, still frowning. “I mean...if you’re sure you don’t have, you know, any other plans?”

Lucy frowned back at her. “Of course not. You know I wouldn’t make other plans after I told you I’d be here, don’t you? And why are you looking at me like that?”

“I don’t know. You look...different, somehow.” Marsha sounded puzzled.

Lucy’s scowl deepened. “No, I don’t. You’re having trouble with your eyes, remember? I’ll see you guys tonight.” She kissed her friend’s cheek, and planted another kiss on the baby’s head. “Bye-bye, Jazzie. Be a good girl for your mom today.”

*

“So what’s wrong with your friend?” Dan asked as he pulled back onto the road. They were running late. He wasn’t sure if he should suggest stopping again, or not.

“Wrong?” Lucy turned on him, bristling defensively. “What do you mean? What makes you think there’s anything *wrong* with her?”

“Her eyes? The doctors? You asked her how she was feeling.”

“Oh.” Lucy’s brow cleared and she relaxed a little. “That. It’s nothing, really. Marsha was in a real bad car accident a couple of years ago, and ever since...well she just hasn’t been the same. And then she had the baby and I think...I think it just made everything worse.” She sighed, and stared out of the window, seemingly lost in thought.

“So, what are you two doing tonight?”

Lucy looked puzzled for a moment. “Tonight? Oh. With Marsha, you mean? Nothing much, I’m just going over to baby sit for her.”

“Oh, yeah? Maybe I can join you?”

She snorted. “Now there’s a really lousy idea. Tempting, but no, thank you. I don’t think that would work out too well.”

Dan frowned. *Why the hell not?* He’d been just about to ask, when she glanced impatiently at the truck’s clock, and gasped. “Is that really the time? Shit, we’re gonna be so late.”

“It really bothers you, doesn’t it?” he asked, casting a regretful glance at the field they were passing—it would have been so perfect. He hated how much she wanted to hide the fact that she’d been with him.

She stared at him, incredulously. “Being late? Of course it does. When have you ever known me to--”

“No. Having people find out. About us.”

“Oh. Well, I mean, you know what the gossip will be like.” She shrugged.

Sure he did, but he didn’t see why it should matter all that much. But clearly it did. To her.

“You’re right. So, what do you think? Maybe we could just pretend like nothing happened last night?” Dan suggested sarcastically as he pulled into the nursery’s parking lot. Unfortunately, Lucy took him seriously.

She heaved a deep sigh. “Yeah, I guess that would be best, huh?”

What? Dan kept his mouth shut tight. He was too surprised, too annoyed, too disappointed to come up with a proper response.

Lucy’s hand was already on the door handle before he shifted into park, and she hopped out of the truck as quickly as she could manage. “Well, thanks for the ride,” she said, flashing him a falsely bright smile, and then she was gone; leaving him lonely and depressed and still completely confused as to where he stood with her.

“Shit,” he muttered as he kicked open his own door and climbed out of the truck. “Shit, shit, shit.” Never before, not once in his entire life, had he ever found himself in such a lousy mood after so much great sex.

* * *

Lucy passed most of the morning in a pleasant, dreamy haze, obsessing over the events of the night before. Okay, so he wasn't a jerk after all, she thought, and once again found herself unable to suppress the stupid smile that insisted on crawling across her face every time she thought about him. She didn't usually find herself having to change her mind once she made it up about something, or someone, but clearly this was one of those rare occasions when she had been way, way, way off base. Dan was-- God, he was wonderful. Cute and sweet and funny and tender and oh, Lord, sooo sexy.

The whole night had just been one surprise after another. And she usually hated surprises. But in this case--well, it was pretty damn hard to complain about anything that left her feeling this good. Her whole body was still throbbing happily in the wake of the first actual orgasms she'd ever experienced.

And that, it appeared, was another thing she'd been hugely mistaken about, because the sex, something she had previously considered sadly overrated, had been...well, phenomenal was not too strong a word to use....

She'd been so nervous, when she'd felt those first waves of heat and tension begin to flood her senses. She knew Dan wanted her. After all, he wasn't the first guy to express an interest in her body. But unlike any of the others she'd been with, he seemed to want her to want him, as well. And while she still hadn't made up her mind how she felt about that, she could feel herself being propelled closer and closer to some invisible edge. She hated being vulnerable, and everything inside her was struggling against the idea of losing control. At the very least, she wanted him to fall with her.

“Please, Dan. Please!” she heard herself beg him finally, and an instant later felt him go hard into her, touching something deep inside, and setting off a chain of explosions that pushed her, not just over the edge of control, but completely beyond it, and way past caring.

A few minutes later, however, her nervousness returned and she cast around in her mind for the most casual response she could make. “Well...I guess I’d better be leaving now, huh?” she’d said as carelessly as she could manage; only to listen in shocked disbelief as he asked her to stay the night--promising to make things better for her the next time around.

“Better?” That had to be a joke, right? Maybe he hadn’t noticed the effect he’d already had on her? Maybe he was insane? Or, just maybe...oh, God...could he really? She felt the edge of his teeth against her ear, felt the blood rush back into her face, and told herself she had nothing to lose by staying to find out.

She shivered again now, just thinking about it. It hadn’t been a joke, after all...

Lucy’s hands were shaking so hard, she had to stop what she was doing and take several deep breaths as the memories caused her body to flush with heat, all over again. Maybe they could sneak away somewhere during lunch--or would that be too obvious? She knew he had a point about pretending nothing had happened. It would only make his job that much more difficult if everyone spent all of their time gossiping about him.

It was probably hard enough, already. Guilt tugged at her conscience. That was another thing he'd been right about--it *had* been her fault. At least partly. So, really, disappointing though it might be, keeping things quiet was not only the most sensible thing they could do right now, it was also no more than she should have expected him to suggest. No more than she deserved.

But honestly, how long did he think they could hope to keep something like this a secret?

She supposed, if they stayed completely away from each other at work, they could maybe keep anyone from finding out until after his parents came back, and he no longer had the responsibility for the whole place weighing on him. But keeping away from him for that long was going to be awfully hard. Maybe she could stop by his place after Marsha's tonight, if it wasn't too late. She really hoped he hadn't made any other plans for the evening, because if she had to wait until tomorrow to have him again, she didn't know how she would stand it.

"Hey there, Lucy. How're you doing today? Everything okay with you?"

Lucy turned to find one of her co-workers smiling at her curiously. She shrugged. "Sure Georgia, why wouldn't it be?"

"Well, you know." Georgia slouched beside her and grinned. "We all heard about how you and Dan blew out of here yesterday afternoon and, to tell you the truth, we were kinda worried about you, kid. But I guess you showed him a thing or two after all, huh?"

Lucy frowned. “What d’you mean?” Jeez. He hadn’t been talking about it already, had he? What was the man thinking? What the hell was the point of suggesting they be discreet, if he was gonna go shoot his mouth off like that, the first chance he got?

Georgia shrugged. “Well, he’s in such a lousy mood and all. I mean, it’s pretty obvious he didn’t get what he wanted. Am I right?”

Lucy blinked. Lousy mood? Dan? “What are you talking about, Georgia? He’s not--”

“What? You’re kidding me. You mean nothing happened?” Georgia looked at her in surprise. “Shit, he’s been biting people’s heads off right and left ever since he got here, girl. And we all figured it was ‘cause he’d been, you know, *disappointed*? Are you telling me he really didn’t try anything yesterday? You didn’t have to cut him off at the knees?”

“He...I...but,” Lucy’s voice faltered to a stop. She felt as though something cold, heavy and hard was pressing on her chest, making breathing difficult and speaking just about impossible.

Disappointed? But that...that wasn’t possible. Was it?

“I don’t know what’s going on, Georgia, believe me,” she said, when she could speak again. “But I think I’d better go and find out.”

Chapter Eight

Dan stared at his desk, at all the papers that were piled there, and knew he didn't have a prayer of getting any of his work done today; nor any other day, either, come to think of it. Not until they'd gotten things straightened out between them. Not until he'd figured out what she was thinking, and talked her around to seeing things his way.

And how long might that take, he wondered gloomily.

He had half a mind to call her in here right now--just to discuss the situation. But that idea had disaster written all over it, for sure. He knew it would be too friggin' obvious to everyone what he really wanted from her. And if by some miracle he managed to get some?

Shit, that would probably be even more obvious, now, wouldn't it? And she had made it crystal clear she didn't want anyone finding out about them. He spun his chair away from the desk and stared out the window. He'd never been anyone's dirty little secret before, and he didn't like it. He didn't like it at all.

The door to his office was suddenly slammed open, as his brother stormed in. "So, what'd you do to her, Dan? Huh? C'mon, tell me. What happened?"

Dan turned around with a sigh. "What are you talking about, Kenny?"

"I'm talking about Lucy, of course. Remember her? I'd just like to hear what you did to her, that's all."

Dan stared at his brother in surprise. "What? No way, Kenny. Forget it. That's between me and her. You and I are not gonna talk about it. Not now, not--"

“Oh, we sure as hell are gonna talk about it,” his brother insisted. “Because she just fuckin’ up and quit. So you can cut the crap about--”

“She did what?” Dan felt his jaw drop. “Why’n the hell’d she do that for?”

“Yeah, and that was my question, too,” Kenny said, his frown faltering, just a little. “I’m still not real sure, actually. She wasn’t real clear about it. But, I know it’s got something to do with you, so--”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake.” Anger surged through Dan as he got to his feet. “I didn’t do anything that-- Shit. Where is she?”

“What do you mean you didn’t do anything? If it wasn’t you then--”

“Kenny!” Dan resisted the urge to shake the information out of his brother, but only with great difficulty. “Where is she?”

“Well...I uh, I think she’s still holed up in the bathroom. Down by the sales office.” Kenny frowned at him uncertainly. “But...shit, Dan, you must have done something. I think she’s *crying*!”

Dan didn’t wait to hear any more. He was pretty sure it wasn’t anything he had done that was making her cry. In fact, he was having a hard time imagining her crying at all. But, obviously someone had said or done something to upset her. And as soon as he found out who that someone was, there’d be hell to pay. He’d make damn sure of it.

* * *

Lucy sat in the stall of the bathroom where she'd barricaded herself, leaned her head against the cool tile wall and hugged herself tightly. She had to get herself back under control before she could leave. She'd come too close to losing it when she was talking to Kenny, and she would *not* break down, damn it--not in front of him or anybody! After two years of having the run of the nursery, she was not going to slink out of here like some kind of whipped puppy. She would walk from this place with her head high.

But it had to be soon. Because, more pressing even than her desire to save face, was the terrible conviction that any minute now, her heart would just explode into a billion tiny pieces.

She'd left Georgia convinced that the woman had simply been imagining things, but everyone she talked to, everyone she saw--whether she asked them, or not--had volunteered the same story. Dan was as bad tempered as anyone had ever seen him, and he'd been that way since he'd gotten out of his truck this morning.

She'd gone over events several times now, in her mind, but she still could not imagine what had gone wrong, unless—

Unless he was already regretting having gotten involved with her.

And if that were the case? Well, there was just no way she could continue working here, that's all. Not if it meant seeing him every day and being constantly reminded of all the things they'd done to each other last night. Especially not when she wanted to do them all over again!

She thought about that for a moment. Really, most of what she remembered were the things he'd done to her. She hadn't actually done all that much to him, had she? Other than that thing with the whipped cream. And now that she thought about it, she probably could have taken a little more time with that, gone a little further, done a little bit more.

She chewed on her lip as she wondered whether he could have been disappointed after all--just like everyone said he was--but had simply been too much of a gentleman to let on about it in front of her. Maybe, as good as it had been for her, it hadn't really been all that wonderful for him?

She chewed harder. Maybe that was what he meant when he said they could do better, and she had misunderstood. The thought tore through her chest, wrenching a loud sob from her. She could feel her face burning with embarrassment even hotter than the tears that scalded down her cheeks.

Someone was pounding on the bathroom door, but she'd locked it and it could damn well stay that way. Anyone who wanted to use the ladies' room would just have to find another one. A few seconds later, she heard a key rattling in the lock, and then Dan's voice; angry, tense and just a little too cold.

"Lucy? Are you in here? What the hell is going on?"

Oh, great. She brushed away her tears with shaky fingers. Just what she needed. The one person in the world she couldn't bear to face right now. And he was ticked off at her?

“Jesus Christ,” she muttered savagely. “What’s a person have to do to get a little privacy, huh? What’s wrong, Cavanaugh? You get lost, or something? Because this is the ladies room, in case you haven’t noticed. Or are you just that fucking desperate to stake your claim on everything around here now?”

Her words hung in the empty air. He had fallen so silent, she wouldn’t have sworn he was still breathing. “Is that what you think?” he asked at last, in a voice so low and quiet, she could barely hear him. “Jesus, Lucy, is that what this is all about?”

“Shit, Cavanaugh, what are you talking about now?” she whined impatiently. “You make no sense, you know that? Is what about what?”

“Kenny told me you quit,” he said, after another long pause. “Is it because of me? Something I did?”

“Ha!” She hugged herself even more tightly. “Don’t flatter yourself. I told you yesterday I was quitting.”

“Yeah, I know. But I thought--” He stopped again.

“You know, if I were maybe trying to collect unemployment or something from you, then you might actually have a reason for asking me why I’m quitting. But, I’m not, so, you know, I’m thinking it’s none of your damn business what I do.”

“Isn’t it?” he asked, way too gently. She gritted her teeth against the pain it caused--as though something within her chest had ruptured. “Lucy?”

“No!” she snapped. “It’s not. Now d’you mind? I’d like to be left alone.”

“Hell, yes I mind,” he yelled back at her. “Are you gonna come out here and talk to me? Or do I have to break that damn door down?”

“Why bother? I can hear you just fine from in here.”

“Damn it, Lucy!”

“What. Do. You. Want?” she snarled, slowly enunciating each word.

She jumped as his fist slammed against the wall of the stall. “Well, what do you think I want? I want to know what happened, of course! Goddamn it, you *weren’t* upset this morning.”

“Oh, and that’s very funny, coming from you,” Lucy grumbled. “You’re the one who’s in such a lousy mood that it’s all anyone can talk about. You’ve made it real obvious you didn’t get what you wanted last night. And you know what Cavanaugh? I’m really sorry that...that you were disappointed about-- well, about what went on last night, and all. But...well...you could have maybe *said* something at the time, you know. And not-- Besides, it wasn’t exactly my fault that-- I mean, just because I...because I...because maybe I, I didn’t,” she broke off on a sob as tears threatened to overwhelm her again. But she might still have recovered if his voice hadn’t been so full of gentle reproach that it destroyed all her defenses.

“Lucy! Disappointed? What are you *talking* about? Oh, honey, no--c’mon, now. Oh, *please* don’t cry. You know that’s not true.”

“It, it’s not?” she gulped between sobs.

Dan sighed. “No, of course it isn’t. Jesus. How could you possibly believe anything as crazy as that?”

“So everybody’s wrong, then?” she persisted, still sniffing through her tears.

“You’re not in a bad mood today?”

He sighed again. “Well, no, they’re right about that.”

“But--? Well, then, why?” She got up then, and opened the door, and stood leaning against the frame, eyeing him curiously.

“Because,” he mumbled, gazing back at her unhappily. “I want to be with you. So much that...well, it scares me. I want us to be together and, this morning...it didn’t really seem like you did. I’ve been going out of my mind all day. Not knowing how you felt about me, about us. Not knowing how to tell you how I felt. Worried because you wanted to pretend last night never happened and--”

“Hey, wait a minute,” Lucy protested. “That wasn’t me. That was your idea!”

He scowled at her. “Yeah, but I didn’t mean it! And anyway, that was after you told your friend there was nothing going on between us.”

She frowned. “Yeah, well, even so...I still don’t get it. I mean, why would you think I didn’t want to be with you?”

“Oh gee, let me think,” he answered, sarcastically. “Was it the way you were so damn anxious to keep anyone from finding out about us? Or was it maybe the fact that you don’t even want me to keep you company tonight while you’re babysitting that finally clued me in?”

“Oh. That.” She shook her head. “You don’t understand. When I said babysitting--Look, I go over there sometimes just to keep an eye on Jasmine so that Marsha can get a break. So she can, you know, maybe take a nap, or paint her nails, or just sit in the bathtub for half an hour and shave her legs without having to worry about the baby. It’s not like she’s going out for the evening, or anything. She just needs a chance to relax once in a while. And...I don’t know if she’d be able to do that if you were there. Or if she thought she was keeping me from doing something else. Something I’d rather be doing. So I didn’t want to tell her about it just yet, that’s all. But, well you know, Cavanaugh, if I were really trying to keep her from finding out about you, I wouldn’t have brought you over there in the first place, now would I?”

The faint beginnings of a smile hovered on Dan’s lips. “What kind of something else?”

“What?” Lucy frowned, confused as much by the abrupt change of subject, as she was by his sudden smile.

“What kind of something else would you rather be doing?” he asked, reaching for her with an intense look in his eyes--a look she’d become very familiar with in the last twenty-four hours.

“Oh, no,” she warned, trying to fend him off as he moved in closer; but he grabbed her hands and wrapped her arms around his waist, and she couldn’t bring herself to pull away.

“Something like this, maybe?” he asked as he lowered his mouth to hers. Her fingers tightened around him as she kissed him back.

“God, yes,” she murmured against his lips. “Just like that.”

He pulled back a little and smiled down at her. “So, then, tell me you do want to be with me, after all.”

She rolled her eyes, but couldn’t help smiling just the same. “You really have a thing for words don’t you?”

“Yep.” He grabbed her by the waist, swung her around and seated her on the counter. “And I want ‘em all. Now tell me.”

“Dan--” Lucy’s breath caught as he leaned into her; planting his hands on either side of her hips and resting his forehead against hers.

“Tell me!” he repeated, his voice vibrating with intensity.

“Yes! Okay? Of course I want to be with you. Jeez.” She blinked up at him, and then had to look away again. “I would have thought that was pretty obvious.”

He chuckled. “Not any more obvious than I thought I was being, and you missed that, too, babe.”

“Well, yeah, but that was just because everyone kept telling me how miserable you were.” She frowned at him, still a little doubtful. “Are you sure you weren’t...you know...disappointed?”

He took her chin in his hand, and turned her face up. “Yes,” he murmured, as he kissed her, lightly. “Very sure.”

Lucy sighed in relief. “Oh. Well, good.”

Dan kissed her again, and then pulled back. “But I need to ask you about something, too. What were you talking about a little while ago-- when you said that about me staking a claim?”

She shrugged. “Nothing, really. It’s just...well, I’m sorry, Cavanaugh, but you do kinda act like you own the place, you know.”

“So you were talking about the nursery, then?”

“Sure. What else would I be talking about?” She frowned at him, puzzled. “What else would you be wanting to stake a claim on?”

“I thought that you maybe meant...you?”

“Me?”

Dan nodded. “I was afraid that was why you were upset. Because you thought what happened between us yesterday was all about me wanting to...oh, I don’t know. Get the upper hand, so to speak. And maybe, maybe establish some kind of hold on you?”

She stared at him. “That’s not even funny. Why would I think something like that?”

“I don’t know.” He sighed and cupped her face in his hands, his thumbs gently brushing across her cheeks. “Maybe because...in some ways...it’s not all that far from the truth? I have been getting pretty desperate about you lately, you know. Wanting to know for sure that you were mine. And wanting to make sure everyone else knew it, too.”

“Oh.” She swallowed hard, as a warm, tingly feeling ran through her. “So you’re saying, because of what’s happened--No, wait a minute.” She pulled his hands away from her face, unable to think clearly while he was touching her like that. “This is too confusing, Dan. One day we hate each other, and then the next--”

“I told you last night,” Dan interrupted, fiercely. “I don’t hate you. I never hated you! I don’t know where you got that idea from. I may have been a little slow on the uptake, figuring out exactly what it was I did feel for you, but I never--”

“Yeah, but still, all of a sudden you’re saying you want some kind of--”

He growled. “It’s not sudden, damn it. What d’you think I’ve been trying to tell you? And what I *want* is for us to stop fighting with each other over everything. And also, I don’t want to hide this anymore, Lucy. Not from you, or your friends, or anybody. I’m tired of trying to hide the way I feel about you.”

She gazed at him curiously. “So, then...how do you feel?”

He looked startled by the question. She tried not to stare at the blush that reddened his cheeks. “How? Oh. Well, actually-- I mean, if you really--” he hesitated for just an instant more, and then, taking a deep breath he plunged right in. “I love you, Lucy Greco. With all my heart.”

She felt herself staring again anyway. “You do? Are, are you sure about that?”

Dan smiled tenderly. “Oh, yeah. I don’t know why it took me so long to figure it out. Maybe because I’ve never really been in love before. But, believe me on this one, babe. I have no doubts what it is I feel for you. I love you.”

“But--how long?” Confused, and still not completely convinced of the truth of what he was saying, she was, all the same, greedy for the details.

“Well, I’ve known for weeks that I wanted to make love to you. It’s practically the only thing I’ve been able to think about, in fact. And last night...I guess I should have known right away that I was in big trouble, because even after everything we did, I only wanted you more. But then today, when Kenny told me you’d quit, and that you were crying! I mean, I had no idea you were upset about us. I thought someone had hurt you and--”

He broke off shaking his head. "I swear to God, Lucy," he continued after a minute. "I was ready to do murder. And that's when I really knew that this was not something I'd be getting over--not easily, anyhow. And, and I don't know; maybe not ever."

"Oh," she said, when he felt silent. Her mind still reeled with confusion and she didn't know what to think. "Wow. That--that's pretty intense."

He grimaced. "Yeah, tell me about it. So, what d'you think? Is there any chance you might, you know, love me back? Hmm? Even a little bit?"

Lucy bit her lip. "I don't know. Maybe," she whispered, swallowing hard.

"Maybe?" Dan stared at her in dismay. The look on his face went straight to her heart, but the truth was, she didn't know how she felt and she didn't want to lie to him.

"Aw, come on, now Lucy, don't play games with me. Please. I need to know how you feel."

"But that's just it, Dan. I don't know how I feel! I mean, for weeks now I thought you were just this...just this big jerk. And that I hated you. And then it turned out you weren't, and I didn't. And then I thought you were just completely wonderful--until everybody started telling me how unhappy you were, and how you obviously hadn't gotten what you'd wanted last night. Then I didn't know what to think. I thought I'd been wrong about everything all over again. And I was just so miserable, and confused, and-- Shit." She broke off, sighing, and leaned her head against his chest, too tired to make sense of anything, anymore.

Dan put his arms around her and held her for a while in silence. And it felt so nice she just stayed there; not thinking about anything, really, except how much better she felt now that he was holding her again, and how really nice it would be to have that feeling all the time. Lucy sighed again, and nestled closer, listening to the strong, steady beat of his heart.

After only a moment longer, she found herself smiling. It was amazing, really, how all the confusion she'd been feeling over the last few weeks just seemed to disappear when she was wrapped in his arms like this. Suddenly, everything seemed simple and clear and so damned obvious, she wondered how she could ever have missed seeing it for what it was.

*

"Why don't you tell me more about the 'wonderful' part," Dan suggested softly. Several minutes had passed and the silence was killing him.

"What's that?" Lucy asked, raising her head at last and smiling up at him.

He caught his breath and smiled back, faintly. Okay, this was good. Things couldn't be too terrible if she was smiling at him. "You, uh...well, you did say that for awhile there you thought I was wonderful. D'ya think we could talk a little more about that? And, you know, maybe figure out some way to get you to feeling that way again?"

The smile disappeared and she gazed at him speculatively for a long, long moment.

Too long. Dan felt his hope begin to fade again.

"No, actually, Cavanaugh," she said at last. "I think we've talked enough."

"Oh." He swallowed his disappointment as best he could. "Okay. Well, then..."

“So kiss me.”

“Huh?” He stared at her in surprise. He couldn’t have heard that right. Could he?

But she was smiling once again, sliding her hands up his chest, and grabbing his shirt just below the collar. “Hey, you said this morning I could choose either showing you how I felt or telling you about it. And, at the moment, I’m just not in the mood to do any more talking.”

Lucy’s fingers slipped inside his shirt. She began to undo his buttons, and his heart jumped as though it’d been drop kicked.

He swallowed hard. “So you’re gonna show me how you feel about me, then?”

“Yep. That’s the plan.” She smiled wider, gazing at him with so much warmth and assurance in her eyes that he felt lightheaded. This was even better than he’d hoped for. Still—

“Right now. Here. In this bathroom?” He had to ask, knowing that if they did this, there was no chance they could keep it a secret. By the end of the day the whole nursery would’ve heard about it.

She had his shirt unbuttoned now, and she glanced up at him as her fingers trailed down his bare stomach. “Unless you have a better idea?”

“Oh. Well, no, actually.” Actually, it was just about the finest idea he’d ever heard. He was just having a little trouble thinking, was all. Especially now that she had her fingers curled into the waistband of his jeans, and was wrestling with the buttons there. “It’s just...”

“You’re not, by any chance, complaining, are you, Cavanaugh?” she inquired, pausing for a moment to look at him with a hint of mischief in her eyes, and an eager smile curving her lips.

He felt his love for her suffuse his chest and radiate outward to every last cell. “Oh, no way, babe,” he assured her, as he tugged her shirt free of her shorts. “Not on your life.”

“Good,” she murmured pressing her lips against his chest for a moment. “Because I’d hate to have to get rough with you, again.”

Dan laughed as he peeled the T-shirt over her head and threw it aside. “Don’t go pushing your luck too far now, Greco,” he advised, leaning in close, smiling in satisfaction at the way her breath caught in her throat and her eyes dilated. “Because we can both play that game, you know. And, just so we’re clear on this? Sooner or later, you *are* gonna tell me how you feel about me.”

“Am I?” She cocked her head to the side and glinted at him challengingly as he unhooked her bra. “You sound pretty sure of that.”

“Mm-hmm,” he murmured, drinking in the sight of her. “I’ll make you.”

“Hunh! Think you can?” Her voice was a hoarse and breathless whisper.

He shook his head. “Think? Uh-uh. I know it.”

“Oh really?” She slid her arms around his neck and grinned. “Well, then, Cavanaugh, what can I say? Except...give it your best shot—babe.”