

A woman with dark hair styled in two buns, looking directly at the camera with a grumpy expression. She is wearing a purple and orange striped sweater. The background is a bright yellow wall with a large green cactus. The cactus has many sharp, light-colored spines.

SHE'S BEEN PRICKED
ONE TOO MANY TIMES.

RUMPY
GIRL &
Cactus

DIRTY HOE LOVE

BRYNN HALE

GRUMPY GIRL & CACTUS

DIRTY HOE LOVE

LAST CHAPTER PRESS LLC

BRYNN HALE





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GRUMPY GIRL & CACTUS INFO

She's digging out from a bad past with men. He's tired of the dating scene. Can a double date with friends grow into love?

Zetty

I'm done. Men have one thing on their minds...and it's definitely not plants. It's something in my pants.

And that's just not happening.

I need something more from them. A promise. A sign. A feeling. And I've never gotten any of those.

Only heartache. So I'm done.

Until my friend Floryn tricks me into a double date. She swears he's a "good guy".

Yeah, right?! I've heard that before.

But when I get there, this Henry is gentle and sweet, not to mention savvy and handsome, but I'm soon to find out he's also got a wild side that I find irresistible.

Can I trust that I won't get pricked again?

Henry

Star Wars...Princess Leia...those silvery blue eyes. She's a dream in the flesh with those two cinnamon roll buns on the sides of her head.

But her attitude has a sharp point to it.

I get it. I've done the dating scene. The apps. The blind dates. The set ups. It gets old.

When my buddy Perry tells me to meet him at Sip Happens, I'm up for a beer, but I'm in store for a whole lot more.

Zetty isn't grumpy...she's tired. Tired of men being jerks.

Can I show this cactus loving innocent young flower that I'm in for the long haul, and more importantly, will she

believe me?

This is a steamy short story romance. No Cliffhangers. No Cheating. Happily Ever After Guaranteed. Grumpy Girl & Orchid is the first in the Dirty Hoe Love series, but all in the series can be read as standalone stories. If you crave short romances with steamy scenes, women getting what they need and want, a few laughs, and a happily ever after, then you'll love this story.

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CHAPTER I

ZETTY

CLEANING THE DELIVERY VAN FOR DIRTY HOES PLANT & Décor is a weekly ritual that just feels right to me. Even though the van never gets disgusting, a thorough clean once a week gets my baby sparkly. I take immense pride in my work and how I represent the business I work for. I have to. I need this job more than my bosses might imagine.

Plus our name might be “Dirty Hoes” but people don’t want to see us actually being dirty. I chuckle to myself. The business name messes with people’s heads in so many ways. But it really emulates the owners and the way they live their lives with humor and a little tongue-in-cheek self-depreciation.

My phone pings in my back pocket, and I track the time on the garage’s clock on the wall. Ten minutes left in my shift.

I shut the van’s side door and wind up the tube around the garage vacuum unit. I pull out my phone and see that Floryn is texting me.

“Really?” I love my co-worker slash friend slash defector from the single life, but she’s been extra attentive lately, and it’s all because she’s feeling guilty.

How dare she fall in love with the dashing Perry St. James!

Literally, a couple of hours after we swore...*pinky* swore, the most sacred of promises...she broke the vow, but she’s so freaking happy. And it makes me both sick...and jealous.

Floryn: Drinks. In 20 minutes. Sip Happens Bar. Please come.

There's no asking. It's almost a demand and that's not like her. I stare at the text, and the three little bubbles show she's typing me more, probably to beg.

Floryn: Come on, Zetty! I see you saw this. Please come!!!

When she starts using multiple exclamation points, I know it's important to her.

My body sags. I'm just so tired and I just want to go home, curl up on the couch with my two stud muffins, Ben & Jerry, and get lost in binging some new show on the 'Flix.

Ahhh, the single life is amazing.

And slightly delusional. None of this dream is currently possible for me.

Floryn: PLEASE. One drink. *On my knees begging*

I chuckle.

Huh. She should be on her knees begging after how she dishonored our pinky swear. I'm mostly kidding. My anger is relatively fleeting when I'm around her. It's one of those friendships that just has a trust. She's just genuinely Floryn. Now, if I could just be honest with her.

Me: Sip Happens? Really?

Bubbles instantly pop up as soon as I hit send.

Floryn: Remember, it's NOT Porkies anymore. That man-meat-market is long gone. Just one drink, Zetty. One.

Before Sip Happens was gutted and restructured into a great little neighborhood spot here in Everville, North Carolina, it was a place to hook-up—or be groped. Now, it's a homey atmosphere where families and friends can go and relax.

Floryn knows I'm so over fighting off men and dealing with the disrespect they give me. I've only been to Sip Happens once before and it was a welcome relief that I didn't get pawed at or my ass grabbed.

I check my pockets and recover a five-dollar bill, a delivery tip from a little old lady who I helped re-pot a philodendron when I really should've been moving onto the next delivery.

Sometimes people are more important.

One drink is currently possible with the unexpected tip. There's only a cold can of soup waiting for me when I leave here. A cold beer sounds much better.

I lock up the van and set the keys in the lockbox on the wall. My process is from rote memory, and I follow it every night. I hate surprises and it's like a cozy blanket to have the same schedule and routine.

I stop when I get to the back door that's all glass, smiling at what I see. Not to be too high and mighty, but I get my appeal to men. I'm hot in a hometown girl meets pin-up girl kind of way. I have a sassy ass and lively boobs. Those carry power for a woman. I like and appreciate my body in ways that women sometimes don't and I wish they would.

But many men appreciate the form without respecting the person underneath and that's my biggest issue.

Why can't they get to know me first? Value my mind and spirit before we get to the horizontal tango.

That's why I've never gone naked dancing. No man has ever made me feel appreciated and maybe even respected. In return, I've never given them my body.

Is it so hard to wine and dine me first? I'm old-fashioned and need to be treated in that manner.

Zetty: I'll be there shortly.

I put my phone in my pocket, ignoring the pinging going off.

Floryn, I said I'm coming...geesh.



THE MUSIC IS SOFT, and people's conversations hit me as soon as I enter the pub. Across the room, I see Floryn, and she's laughing with Perry. I'm the third wheel? I like her boyfriend, but really, Floryn?

I want to do single things, not be joining in on coupley things, without being half of a couple.

I think fast...a migraine is coming on. And this one is a doozy. Plus, my babies need to be taken care of at home. Plants can't water themselves. And it's been two nights since I washed my hair. Things that need to be taken care of ASAP—all reasonable excuses.

As I get closer, I slide to a stop. Oh boy, this is not a third-wheel situation at all. This is a freaking double date. A set up. A blindside. A surprise attack.

I glare at Floryn, and she gives me her sweet smile and shoulder shrug, but her eyes are wide and worried. She should be worried.

Some friend you are—first, breaking the pinky swear, now this?! *Traitor*.

I look over at the man sitting alone on his side of the booth and his eyes stop time. I'm trapped inside a kaleidoscope of colors... green, blue, brown, gold... every imaginable color swirls around and sucks me in. He's got me captured and intrigued. Even though his lanky long-distance runner build is not my typical type, I can't help but be interested.

My heart beats a faster rhythm.

That's weird.



HENRY

Perry stops mid-sentence, and his gaze lands at the door. I follow, and whoa...

Perry wasn't wrong. If that's her, she's gorgeous. And I'd be one lucky S.O.B to have a date with a beautiful woman,

who has hair cinnamon buns like Princess Leia.

Taking in the glare she's sending to Floryn, I'm starting to think I wouldn't be so lucky. Her gaze lands on me, and the most electric smile slides across her face. She's an absolute ray of sunshine.

I scoot farther into the booth. I don't want her to feel uncomfortable or blocked when she sits down.

Zetty? That's what Perry said her name is and I'm curious if there's a story behind the name. And the hair is fascinating. *How long is it really?*

I'm already wondering if I can convince her to sit twenty-five hours and seven minutes with me as we watch all eleven Star Wars movies. Spending an entire day with this flower would make me one happy man.

I try not to get caught eyeing her curves, but every dip and turn has me wanting to worship her body and lavish all my attention on her. I haven't been involved with a woman who has a creative outlet like her, but I just know that we will get along well... at least if she sits down, which she might not do.

"Floryn, may I have a moment?"

Crap.

My heart drops a little but picks up speed when she smiles at me before turning away and walking to the bar's end.

I have a feeling that she didn't know about the double date. If I was closer to him, I'd give Perry a punch in the shoulder. No woman should be ambushed like this. It's unfair to her, especially when I never wanted something to work out as much as I want this to.

Floryn leans over and kisses Perry. "In case she murders me, I love you."

Perry chuckles while I get a little envious. That is what I want. It's what I've always wanted. But according to all my exes, I'm just too nice of a guy.

When the ladies are out of earshot, I lean toward him. "What were you thinking? She had no idea I was going to be

here.”

“Zetty wouldn’t have come if she knew, and Floryn is convinced that you two will hit it off. It made her so happy to have you two meet. I couldn’t say no.”

I sigh. I get it. If I were lucky enough to have an amazing woman as my partner, I’d do anything I could to keep her happy. That’s what a man should do.

“This was wrong, though. She’s not happy about it, and I don’t blame her. I think I’m going to head out and she can hang with you without the pressure.” I’m working on sliding out of the booth when Perry grabs my arm and shakes his head.

I look to my right...

Well, that’s a surprise.

CHAPTER 2

ZETTY

I CAN'T BELIEVE MY FRIEND AMBUSHED ME LIKE THIS. EVEN though I know this situation is different than what my mother used to do to me it still triggers that inner child in a way that Floryn can't even imagine.

In the middle of the night, my mother would throw our things in several bags—leaving almost everything we accumulated in a few short months and sometimes only weeks—behind, taking clothes and bare essentials with us.

The places I have lived in are so many that I can't even count how many times I've moved. I think I've also forgotten about places because we were there so short of time, more of a visitor than a resident.

It's how I arrived in Everville. When I was sixteen, I stayed when my mom moved on in the middle of the night... without me.

The memories start to choke me. They're dry and bitter. I push them down as quickly as they appear. I've learned that the past doesn't choke-hold me.

You'd think that was the worst part, but it's not. Because of my mommy dearest and me wanting to have a relationship with her, when she came back, I welcomed her into my home, then she took everything I had, cash, jewelry, nice shoes—anything she could hock for a little cash. And that's what caused me to get evicted.

Nobody knows. I don't want them to know.

I've been saving up for my next place, but every time I apply for a new place, they contact my last landlord who feels stiffed, and I get denied. A vicious circle that has me utilizing alternative sleeping arrangements.

Floryn must've seen something in my face. "Oh, Zetty, I'm so sorry. I just wanted to do something nice for you, and Henry's such a great guy, but I should've told you and not dragged you down here." She wraps herself around me in a tight hug. "We can leave now and have a girls' night if you want. We'll watch action movies, eat caramel popcorn, drink milkshakes, and do whatever you want."

I watch my friend apologizing all over herself and wonder if that is what I really want. She's so happy and head over heels in love with Perry. Should I hold myself accountable to my untrusting past, or should I take a chance on a future, or at least a good cold drink and some laughter?

And man, I need to laugh.

I grab Floryn's arm. "Don't ever do that to me again, please."

"Never...*ever* again." She holds my hands and gives a squeeze. "I promise."

I nod. I believe her. Now to believe in something more.

I turn around and head toward the table. "Come on. I'm here. I might as well enjoy some company."

She smirks. "That's the spirit."

I walk to the table. "Hello, I'm sorry. I had some business to discuss with my co-worker."

Henry slides back to the far end of the booth. "Hope everything's okay. Perry tells me you work at the same place as Floryn at...umm..." He rubs his hand behind his neck. He can't say the name, and I find it endearing.

I give him a big smile as I slide in. "Dirty Hoes?"

His cologne wafts to me as he moves around uncomfortable, and my stomach does a couple of flips. He smells like baby powder, clean and fresh...youthful.

I'm around flowers all day, and I love it when a scent can still capture my attention. Henry's has that ability and I'm taken.

"That's a fascinating business name." He leans in closer. "Honestly," he blushes, "I thought it would be a...."

"Strip club." The four of us say at the same time and everyone laughs.

We know what people think, but the name makes people remember. Period. It sticks with a person. The business needs to have an edge in retail to ensure they are memorable these days. This is our edge. And then when people come inside, we sell the hell out of plants. I can sell a *Pilea peperomioides*—Friendship Plant—or a cactus because I can smell a person who will ignore a plant from a mile away. Depending on the cactus, they can walk away for days and weeks and it'll be fine.

But Henry strikes me as someone who can actually take care of a plant.

And maybe a person...

It seems that the business name is also a great icebreaker when getting to know somebody.

And I love hearing Henry talk. He has a polished cadence that makes me think of a smooth shot of whiskey, but he takes such care with his words and maintains eye contact the whole time.

He's taking in every bit of me, and I don't know how it happened, but our legs line up next to each other, and our upper bodies lean into the other. He kept his arm over the back of the booth, not touching me, not crowding me, but letting me know I have his undivided attention. He's taking in what I have to say.

"Do you like being an accountant?" I ask while sipping the gin and tonic I upgraded to instead of a beer. Just nursing the one since I have a tight budget.

"I do. I'm good at it, and I like that I can help businesses flourish without having to be socializing all the time."

“What type of clients do you have?”

“I have big companies like Perry’s, but I have several small businesses as well. I can help out and make sure they can get the bearings and stay afloat to be in business for generations. I think small businesses need more support, and I want to and can provide that.”

I smile at him. I know Cali and Mari the owners of Dirty Hoes could use somebody like him, so I suggest it. I didn’t even think about whether he was worthy. The suggestion just flew out of my mouth.

“Outsourcing is important. Know your strengths when it comes to business,” he says. “Some people can do everything, but they are a very different breed. Specializing in what you do best is very important to staying relevant too. I mean, I have to keep on top of everything accounting, but I don’t keep up on the newest computers—I leave that to my IT guy.”

“And selling plants is Dirty Hoes.”

He slides in a little closer, and my stomach flops. His warm whiskey breath, a creamy caramel and brown sugar, slips over my face. I steady my breathing. He isn’t invading my space. He’s giving me privacy, us privacy. And Perry and Floryn seem oblivious to us anyway.

“Do you think I can make a cold call to Dirty Hoes to sell my services tomorrow?” He softens his voice, making him sound huskier. I melt inside, his genuineness coating me.

“I think that’s a great idea.” I’m giddy inside. I’ll get to see him again. Hopefully, I won’t be out on a delivery, but then I get inspiration. “Henry, I get there at eight to set up the morning’s deliveries. Why don’t you meet me there, and I’ll introduce you?”

A smile slides over his lips, and the swirling colors of his eyes brighten. There’s no cockiness or smirk in place. He’s not hiding that he’s excited with what I suggested.

“I’d love to.”

His leg brushes against mine again, and he keeps it there. His warmth seeps into me, both an unsettling and yet welcome

feeling.

And I think I love it.

CHAPTER 3

HENRY

I'M STANDING OUTSIDE DIRTY HOES AND HAVE BEEN HERE FOR the past twenty minutes. I was too eager this morning and couldn't wait to see Zetty, so instead of pacing in my home, I thought I'd stand outside the front doors of Dirty Hoes and give people passing by something to think about. I wouldn't put it past them if they thought I was looking for a lap dance or something.

I'm fully convinced Zetty's worth the wait.

Last night was one of the best nights of my life. She's so easy-going, honest, and amusing. But there's also something slightly concerning about her. We ordered dinner, but she claimed she'd eaten. I offered up my fries and she happily munched on a couple. But I could hear her stomach growl. Maybe she wasn't hungry, but it seemed odd to me.

A beat-up yellow car pulls into the parking lot. I'm pretty sure rust is the only thing that's holding it together. Zetty sits behind the wheel, and I'm blasted with a giddiness that I thought was only meant for women and children. I'm proving that to be false and I don't hate the feeling.

Heading towards her vehicle, I notice her eyes widen, and she leans over the passenger seat to throw a couple of things in her bag, and she steps out, slamming the door. And then she runs towards me.

"Henry, hi. I'm so sorry. I didn't have your number, and Cali and Mari were running late, so I tried to get here as quickly as possible."

Her frantic tone is unsettling, and she seems disheveled. Her buns askew and her shirt half-tucked.

But we'll be alone, and I like the sound of that.

She loops her arm through mine and pulls me towards the entrance. But right before I spin, I see the sleeping bag in her car and the pile of clothes on her front seat. A pit develops in the bottom of my stomach.

We make it to the door, and she unlocks it and turns on the lights. I step in and take a look around. The setup has a magical feel to it. It doesn't feel like a plant shop, but rather the way everything is displayed makes a person feel like they're in an enchanting garden.

I can sense Zetty's gaze stays on me, and I'm enjoying the attention. I wore my best chinos that emphasize everything and a sweater that tells the story that I run marathons and work out daily.

I look back over my shoulder. "I don't have any plants. I'm afraid that I'd kill them."

She laughs and snaps her fingers at me. "Cactus, that's what you want."

I see a desert display with cactus plants scattered in a pattern that would seem haphazard, but it's almost a piece of artwork the way the variety of greens melds together.

I reach a finger out and get pricked. "Ow." I suck my finger into my mouth. I catch Zetty staring at me with a big smile. "That plant has a good defense system."

She shakes her head. "Well, don't touch it. You *look* at it."

Zetty moves around the room and turns on overhead lights and twinkle lights splayed out over displays and up-lights in corners.

I watch her hips sway as she opens up French doors and turns on the lights into what has to be a greenhouse.

Amazing, they attached a greenhouse to the building and made it into one ample space.

“What the... Oh, my god!” Zetty gasps.

With long strides, I’m at her side in no time. “What’s wrong?”

She points into the room. “Raccoons—or a bull—got into the greenhouse.” Her eyes dart around the room. “It’s a mess. Cali and Mari are going to be so upset.”

I soak in the carnage. Plants, mud, and dirt are strewn all over the floors. Pots are smashed and littered all over the place. Half-eaten plants ooze goo onto the floor. I don’t know anything about plants, but even I can tell that most of the plants won’t survive. It’s an insurance situation, and I hope they have a good policy.

I reach out to Zetty and rub her back. Her shoulders slump, and her arms hang loosely at her side. It’s easy to tell that she is upset and worry about her bosses. They must all be good friends.

Gratitude fills me that she has that. I’m a transplant to Everville, and the only friend I’ve been able to make has been Perry. I only moved here because my ex did. Obviously, she wasn’t my ex at the time of the move. I moved here with her, thinking we would make a life together. Ten days later, she left in the middle of the night.

It was me she was trying to get away from and didn’t know how to break it off, so she moved, not expecting me to join her. I don’t understand why she wanted to end things. She either couldn’t or didn’t want to tell me, and I’ve had to accept the fact that sometimes a person just doesn’t know. But I stayed here in Everville, even though it never felt like home. I didn’t know where else to go, and returning to Vermont wasn’t possible, so why not stay?

Zetty makes a move to enter the greenhouse to start cleaning up. I reach for her hand and stop her.

“Let me take a look around first. Make sure it’s cleared out before we start cleaning up.”

She startles at my touch but relaxes and nods. “Good thinking.”

At the side of the door is a broom. I grab it and enter the greenhouse.

“You don’t have to clean up. I can—”

I lean into her, and she smells like honey. It’s intoxicating.

“Zetty, I’m here. I don’t have anywhere else to be. I’ll help. But first, no vermin in the business. It would give Dirty Hoes a bad name.” I wink at her.

She chuckles and rolls her eyes adorably. “Like it doesn’t already have one of those.”

Zetty grabs my arm as I walk past her. “Be careful. They’re small town raccoons. They’re aggressive.”

I love her concern for me. It makes me want to puff up my chest a little bit.

“I’m from a farm in upstate Vermont. I understand wildlife.”

Keeping the broom ready, I move around the greenhouse until some scurrying is heard in the corner.

I follow the noise when Zetty speaks up behind me. “Do you hear that?”

She slowly entered the greenhouse when I wasn’t looking, but she’s still several steps behind me.

“Yeah, I think it’s back here.”

I step over several large broken clay pot pieces and leave footprints in the soil laid out everywhere. I stop in my tracks when I turn the corner and a gang of raccoons huddles in the corner. They get on their hind legs and dance toward me like doing a musical number from *West Side Story*. I kid you not. I think one pulls out a switchblade and another one bares its teeth menacingly.

“Ummmm...Zetty?”

“Yeah.”

She starts moving closer to me, but I catch her gaze and shake my head.

“There’s half a dozen of them, and they’re pissed.”

I eye the Sharks, or are they the Jets? Who cares? Not important. We’re in trouble.

They move closer, and I peek back at the trail to the doors to ensure I won’t trip over something. I’ll have to be quick.

I launch myself at Zetty, throwing the broom at the raccoons, grasping Zetty’s hand, and pulling her with me.

“Run!” I put Zetty in front of me to glance behind us. The raccoons zoom around in a chaotic disorganization but stampeding toward us all the same.

We make it to the doors and slam them closed. I hold them shut, and when I gaze through the glass, the raccoons smack into it and gnaw at it. They’re no longer from *West Side Story*. They came straight from an episode of *The Walking Dead*.

Zetty and I breath heavily.

“I think they’re rabid,” I say.

She looks at me. “I’m going to call animal control and the police.”

The world halts as Zetty leans over and kisses my cheek. “Thank you for saving me from the mutant raccoons.”

Maybe it’s the adrenaline or the fact she kisses my cheek, but a boldness I never harnessed before springs forward, and I kiss her lips while keeping my weight against the door.

“I’ll save you anytime, Zetty.”

Her eyes glaze over, and she gets on her tiptoes and kisses me like every Hollywood kiss has ever showcased in their blockbusters. Full-lips. Hard pressure. An urgency that I’m here for.

The raccoon’s head butt the door, snapping us out of the moment. But I’m swearing, here and now, that won’t be the end of our kisses. That one is only the appetizer.

Our breathing is heavy, and Zetty leans against my chest.

“We should probably get this taken care of before we get invaded.”

She shakes from the moment. “Huh. Oh, yeah. That. Geez.”

The softest pink tinge coats her cheeks, and I can't help but give off a dopey grin that I created that. It's both the worst of times and the best of times for us.

The raccoons hiss and gurgle behind the doors. Some of them are little battering rams and the door handles crack against my spine.

“Zetty...hurry, please.”

She pulls out her phone and dials.

“9-1-1, Dirty Hoes has crazy, zombie raccoons. We need an exterminator, the police, or animal control! We need anyone and everyone!”

Her eyes widen.

“No! This *isn't* a prank call.”

I laugh. This is an exciting start to the day.

Zetty will certainly never be boring.

CHAPTER 4

ZETTY

CALI AND MARI SHOW UP, AND WITH HENRY NEXT TO ME, WE all stand outside as animal control does a final walk-through of the building to ensure they retrieved all the wild raccoons.

According to the animal control officers, they're not rabid, thank goodness, but there's a litter of babies they needed to protect, which according to those professionals, explains the aggressiveness. When I hear this, my heart goes out to them.

That's what parents are supposed to do. Take care of their babies. That doesn't mean they're not scary.

Man, it won't be soon enough if I never meet a family of raccoons again.

Henry's still giving his statement to the police for insurance purposes.

Cali's and Mari's faces slip into sadness. The whole greenhouse is going to be deemed a total loss. Nothing is salvageable from what I could see and what I overheard from one of the animal control people. The raccoons even ate through the plastic outer shell and ruined it.

Thankfully, it sounds like Cali and Mari will be reimbursed, but that doesn't mean anything for the company right now. They're out of inventory, and with the fall weather moving on and winter weather quickly moving in, there won't be enough time to get more plants into the mountains. They'll have to decide what they want to do until Christmas plants and holiday greenery come up for order.

The policeman shakes Henry's hand and walks away. I bite on my lower lip and make my way over to him.

He gives me a big smile and chuckles. "You okay?"

I cock my head and look at the sky as if I'm thinking hard. "Well, let's see. Killer raccoons, greenhouse destroyed, first kiss, all wrapped up into a sunny morning." I chuckle. "It's been interesting to say the very least."

He catches my gaze, his smile leaves his face, and he turns serious. "Have dinner with me."

I step back at the demand. Not that I'm afraid, but surprise overwhelms me. It's not like him and it sets me back to those men who didn't care what I wanted.

He steps closer to me. "Zetty, I'm sorry. I didn't mean for it to come out like that. I'm not demanding. I'm just...well..." He rubs at the back of his neck, and his cheeks redden. "I like you, Zetty. A lot. I shouldn't have said it like that. I'm just...excited."

A shy and embarrassed smile shines on me. He reaches out and holds one of my hands. He's gentle and tender. I expect his hands to be smooth with what he does for a living, but they're not silky soft. There are some rough edges that I find interesting.

"Will you please have dinner with me?" he attempts again, slowly and carefully.

I stare at our hands. It feels nice, but I'm still hesitant.

Chances, either you take them and wish you hadn't or don't take them and wish you had.

The saying plays over in my mind.

I peek at Henry's face, and he isn't pushing me. He's not demanding. He's patient.

"Yes, I'd really like that...because I like you, too, Henry."

His face lights up like a little boy on Christmas morning, and I can't help but giggle at this grown man's excitement. It's contagious.

Then he leans over and gives me the sweetest kiss—no more giggles.



I RAN to the gym to take a shower after work and before making my way across town. My hair is back in its traditional rolled buns. I don't change it up and I never wear it down. It's comfortable and safe for me. I started doing the style after my mother left me here and then just kept doing it. Haven't had a haircut in...*wow*, nine years.

I park in front of Henry's house. Our first date is him cooking for me. Not us going to a restaurant. But his house. But this is probably better. I don't have the extra cash for a Dutch-date. I stopped off for a bottle of wine...the fancy kind...five dollars from the bargain bin. The lady behind the counter assured me that it was good. I want this date to go well, but my heart crashes against my breastbone and the world does a quick roller coaster ride as panic sets in.

I dial Floryn. I have to redial twice because my hands are shaking too much.

As soon as she answers, I blurt out, "What am I doing? This is crazy. I'm at his freakin' house. Our first date is *at* his house."

"Oh, crap. Zetty, you can leave, if it's too much. I'll have Perry text him that you're not feeling well."

I sigh and a sense of calm falls over me. Knowing she would do that for me makes me feel better.

"No, I'm not sick. And even if we're just friends, I like him. I can't do that."

I let my head fall back on the headrest. I guarantee she's smiling right now. I can hear the motion. It's palpable through the phone.

"Stop it," I grumble.

"What?" she sing-songs innocently.

You know what.

“I’m just having dinner.”

“I know.”

Floryn is doing a little happy dance in her car seat right now. I can hear the squeak of the leather. And in a lot of ways the dance is giving me hope.

“Seriously. Stop it,” I growl.

It’s dinner. Simple meal between two people. Of opposites sex. Who are attracted to each other? But it’s still just dinner.

Who am I kidding? Dinner can be so much more. Lead to more. End in more. And I want so much more in my life. I’m tired of less. Really stinkin’ tired.

I straighten my back. “I’m going in.”

Floryn’s voice smiles at me through the phone, “Have fun!”

I hang up. I don’t want her to gloat even further.

I take several deep breaths and step out of my car. I stand by the door and take a couple more.

This will be fun, Zetty. You’ll enjoy yourself. You’ve liked being with him so far. What makes this any different? Nothing says we can’t be friends.

But friends with benefits never work. How can I even give benefits? I’ve never done benefits. Heck, friends with guys has never worked for me either. I should go home to the nearest parking lot. That will be a fun-filled evening.

Great, now I depressed myself even further.

The wind whips up from the Blue Ridge Mountains, and a chill coats my skin. I lean against my car. It’s going to be a cold night. The only benefit I need right now is a roof over my head that doesn’t run on tires. I gaze down.

Bald tires at that.

CHAPTER 5

HENRY

THIS EVENING IS GOING BETTER THAN I COULD HAVE EVER hoped. I didn't know if it would be a good idea to have her come here or if we should go to a restaurant. After talking with Perry, I thought this would be best. I didn't want to share any of my time with her talking to the waitress or paying the bill. I want her all to myself and I want to give her my attention.

We discussed more of my work, which I find boring to talk about when she fascinates me.

I spoke more about my childhood in Vermont, and she's lived in so many places. I can't believe all the states and towns she's lived in or visited. Before Everville, I was a Vermont native, but I'd love to travel. She acts like it's nothing.

I try to get her to open up about where she currently lives, but she keeps her mouth pretty tight-lipped on that topic. Maybe she's scared I'm a stalker, and I can see that. Women have issues with people taking advantage of their personal space that men normally don't have.

She's terrific, but excitement fills me up when we get on the topics of favorite movies, and she is an action buff. I've hit gold with this woman.

My favorite pastime is movies. I'm not much for a lot of social interactions. Once a week, having a beer with Perry is enough for me. I like to unwind at home. Otherwise—I cook a nice meal and pop in a movie.

Zetty is the same. My exes have wanted to go out all the time and attend all these different functions, parties, and bars.

That never suited me.

“There’s nothing like staying in with good takeout and movie marathons.” Zetty takes a sip of her wine.

The bottle of fancy red she bought is tasty and perfect with the chicken parmesan I made for dinner.

“I agree. Granted, I like to try new recipes. But now and then, takeout is great after a long day.”

Zetty gives me a big smile. “Again, dinner was absolutely delicious.”

“Thank you.”

I want to cook for you all the time.

It’d be so easy to say that out loud, but even that’s too much on a first date.

Zetty got up from the table after we ate and started doing the dishes. I tried to get her to stop, but she wouldn’t have any of it. So I conceded and dried while she washed.

I didn’t want the night to end and searched my brain for something to keep her engaged so I could just enjoy her presence.

I pass behind her in my galley kitchen, my hand brushing over her back. “Would you like to watch a movie?”

She tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear and nods. When I opened the door to her, I was ecstatic that she had her hair in the cinnamon buns. It seems like such a Zetty trait that I’d miss it if she didn’t do them for this evening.

We make our way into my den with the bigger TV than the living room. She doesn’t bat a lash when I suggest Star Wars—the original trilogy.

I sit as close as I dare to when I set up the movie from a streaming service. My palms sweat a little when she moves in closer to me.

I work at getting more relaxed on my couch, but I’m not even trying to fool myself into thinking I’m watching the

movie, which doesn't matter. I can recite these movies in my sleep.

She scoots closer, and her leg rests against mine. The pre-teen in me wants to pump my fist in the air. She brings out the youth in me, and I love that feeling.

There is something about Zetty that feels right. Since I laid eyes on her, she became my north star. I've never been so comfortable with another person before. I want her to be everything to me. My best friend, lover, companion, and hopefully, one day, my wife and the mother of my children.

This instantaneous batch of emotions has me throwing caution to the wind.

"I've seen these movies a million times. Nothing changes. I'd like to make out instead."

Honesty is the best policy...right?

I hope.

Her head swivels to face me and my heart clips along like a Kentucky Derby winner in my chest.

She grabs the remote from the coffee table, turns it off, and her lips land smack center on mine. I can't help the smile as we fuse together.

I mentally fist bump in the air.

The kissing heats up fast and easy, and I devour every moment. She feels so good in my arms. Smells so sweet and fresh. Tastes better than the most divine chocolates. I'll never tire of the delicacy that is Zetty.

I lay back on the couch and bring Zetty on top of me. My hands roam up and down her back. I boldly move to her thighs and squeeze them. I can lay here and kiss her for days and never get tired.

Zetty freezes and pushes herself up from me. Her eyes are wide. Her lips are puffy and pouty from my kisses. Her hair is slightly disheveled from my hands holding her to me.

"I'm a virgin."

I smile. Perfect.

“I’m not.”

Her girlish laugh hits me hard, and I puff up my chest.

“Figured.” She stiffens in my arms. “Don’t hurt me.”

I soften toward her. That is the last thing I could ever want to do. I only want to cherish her.

I cup her cheek. “We can take it slow.”

She rubs her cheek against my palm and worries her lip. “I don’t want to, and that’s something new for me. You make me feel out of control, Henry. In a good way. Before it felt like I was being used versus being appreciated.”

“Tell me more, baby. I want to know you.”

She straddles me and gets more comfortable as she traces her fingers over the buttons of my shirt.

“My mom abandoned me at sixteen. The men that have shown any interest in me only ever wanted one thing. When I didn’t give it to them, they were gone.” She huffs, “You could say I’ve been pricked too many times by a multitude of pricks.”

“I’m assuming you’re not talking about the cactus.”

She shakes her head. “This one hurts even more.”

I lift her chin so she’ll look at me. “We can wait. You’re worth the wait, Zetty.”

My libido is kicking me in the testicles, but it’d kill me if she does something she’ll regret later. I want more with this beautiful woman and nurturing a strong relationship with a solid foundation is what we need to make a forever possible. I won’t jeopardize that.

I sit up and her hands slip behind my neck. “I don’t want us to have a one-night stand. I want you for the long haul, baby.”

“I’ve got issues.”

I shrug. “Who doesn’t? I followed my ex-girlfriend here like some damn Tomcat, and she left me. I stayed here. I still don’t know why she left or why I stayed, but having you here with me, I’m starting to think that the Universe has a fucking plan.”

“Wow,” she giggles, “You’re not sounding like that great of a catch, Henry.”

I laugh with her. “I know. But the point is we both have a past. I just want you to be my future.”

She sighs. “Future isn’t a word I think about.” She swallows and I can hear how deep the move goes. “Henry, I live out of my car. Probably not something you want to get involved with. I’m lost right now.”

I stare deep into her eyes. “Now you’re found.”

She leans toward me, staring back into my eyes, her eyes flutter closed, and she kisses me with a clarity of purpose. I wrap her in my arms and hold her gaze.

She backs away. “Make love to me.”

Nothing has hardened my cock like those four words. This woman surprises me at every turn.

I slowly lift us off the couch and carry her into the bedroom. Her first time won’t be on the couch. I’ll need as much room as possible to worship the fantastic creature before me.

She lets me undress her slowly as I kiss each part of her body. I’m physically showing her how grateful I am that she’s giving me such a precious gift. I’m letting her know she can believe in me. The way I believe in her.

I undress for her when she is spread out on the bed before me without a stitch of clothing. Watching her fidget, bite her lip, and rub her thighs together is my biggest turn-on. There’s tension in those thighs and after I’m done every muscle will be like Jell-O.

I lower my boxers, and my dick smacks up against my stomach. I can’t recall ever being this hard for anybody in my

life.

Her eyes bulge, and she licks her lips. “Wow...and maybe *ow*.” She cringes.

I chuckle. “It’ll fit, honey. You’re made for me.”

I slowly kiss her bright yellow-painted toes and work my way up her legs to the top of her head. I caress, lick, and worship her, knowing this will never be enough.

CHAPTER 6

ZETTY

I SHIVER AT HIS EVERY CARESS. I'VE NEVER FELT CHERISHED before, and that is precisely what he is doing with me now. He treats me like I'm a treasure he's both uncovered and is ready to make his. It's possession without a fight. I want to be his.

My hands hold the bedspread tight as Henry lays over me and slowly enters one finger.

A moan unleashes from me, and I arch my back. My hard nipples rub against his broad, hard chest. My eyes fly open as my body starts to pulse. He gazes down at me and I'm lost in the northern lights of his eyes. How can somebody have such beautiful, eclectic colors swirling around?

His Adam's-apple bobs as he slowly enters another finger and strokes me.

He kisses me and captures my moans.

"You're so wet, Zetty. God, you have no idea what that does to me."

His thumb comes into play and swirls my clit.

I shudder.

"That feels good, doesn't it?" he asks raspily.

"Yes."

He's giving me a stretch, and it's deliciously arousing. Nothing like I've ever experienced. It's intimate and yet he's careful not to pressure me.

I release the bedspread and clutch my hands to his back and shoulder.

“Do you want more, Zetty? Do you need more?” He breathes his questions into my mouth.

I nod vigorously.

Henry’s fingers leave my body while pleasure is on the brink, and his body lifts from mine.

I physically deflate from losing his touch, and I whimper.

“One second, honey. I need a condom.”

My heart lightens, and within no time. Henry is back. He kneels before me, fully gloved with a cock that I don’t think will fit.

His breathing is labored, and his normally colorful eyes are black like obsidian. He watches my face, and a soft smile comes out.

“Honey, I’ll go slow. It’ll be okay, promise.”

I nod, but the shiver that runs through me makes him still.

He tips his head. “Can I take your hair down?”

I swallow hard. It’s the one thing that I’ve protected, that’s mine. Well, after my hymen.

I give a nod and his face lights up.

He untwists and runs his hands through my hair. The feeling of being touched there makes my back arch and goosebumps rise everywhere.

Everywhere.

I whimper. “Oh, God...” A tear drips from the corner of my eye. It’s time to let go of the past.

“Zetty, are you okay?” His face softens. “Was that too much? Would you like to stop?”

“No.” I shake my head. “That is the last thing I want, Henry.”

“I want you.”

He lays down over me. I don't think I'll ever get tired of being wrapped up in and underneath him. Who knew that a man's weight was so heady?

Henry blankets me fully and kisses me senselessly. His fingers play around at my softness, and he lines himself up with me.

He ends the kiss.

I open my eyes, and his mouth is directly above mine. His eyes lock with mine. He slowly enters me inch by inch.

He catches my gasp in his mouth as he kisses away the pain.

The sensation of being filled up was something I could never imagine. I've read romance novels, watched a few adult films for amusement, and talked to girlfriends, pretending to be an expert, but nothing compares to the actual action. I'm overwhelmed, but it feels so fucking good to be lost in his touch and gaze.

Henry stops. "This might hurt."

I grip him tighter. He plunges the last bit into me, and I'm filled by a man who has given me the respect I need and deserve. I groan and wince at the invasion, even if it feels heavenly, it's still a moment that's not exactly painless.

Henry stills his hips, swallows every bit of my discomfort, and plays with my nipples to keep my pleasure the main focus.

Several seconds pass when I move my hips up against Henry.

Henry takes the hint. Kissing me deeply, he squeezes my breast, and then slowly pulls out and glides his way back in.

Electrical charges shoot up my spine and back down to my toes. He picks up the pace after a few thrusts. Then he keeps to that pace before going faster. Over and over, winding the coil inside of me.

Soon I'm in a vortex of pleasure. I wrap my legs around Henry and pull him in tighter.

“Henry?” I don’t know what I’m asking for.

He drives harder and faster. Sweat beads down his forehead. I’m heating from the inside out.

“I got you, honey. I’ll get you there.”

His words. His care. His touch. It’s everything I’ve ever imagined I’d never have. I’ve never felt so connected. So whole. So completely over my head.

Then the heavens opened and burst through me as a searing pleasure bomb bursts from my core, flooding my whole body like a dam breaking inside of me. Something I’ve blocked for a long time.

“Fuck.” I scream. “Yes! Yes! Oh, God, yes!” Every moment of the past is lost in his devoted attention.

Henry jackhammers into me faster and harder as my walls quake around him, squeezing him, caressing his cock.

“Zetty,” he growls and I can feel his hardness grow.

“I love this, Henry.”

I love you...

Henry jerks and buries himself deep inside of me as he fills the condom and not me. I don’t know why that thought bothers me. It’s like I’m missing a part of the moment.

I melt into the sheets, and Henry pulls out of me. I groan at the feeling of no longer being filled. I’m missing him in a way I never have experienced.

He gives me sweet kisses. “Let me take care of the condom. I’ll come back and we can talk.”

I give him a shy smile and blush at the thought, which is crazy thinking when we look at what we just did.

Henry smiles and gives me another kiss before he gets up.

He returns from the bathroom with a wet washcloth and cleans me. Attention that I never expected. I nibble on my bottom lip at his thoughtfulness.

He climbs into bed and holds me close.

I curl in his arms, basking in the after-effects, and relish every moment. I'm relaxed and calm. Something I haven't felt in so long.

My shields are down, and I'm enjoying this quiet connection. The silence feels comfortable and my body still scintillates with lingering bliss.

He kisses my hair, and I'm swaying in between the two realms of consciousness and unconsciousness.

“Move in with me.”

My eyes snap open. I sit up and glare down at him. My stomach flips inside of me and my head pounds as my heartrate rockets.

“No. That's not what this is. I...I can't.”

I scurry out of his arms and fumble with the twisted sheets as I get out of the bed. I hunt for my clothes.

“Zetty, where are you going?”

I don't answer. I must find my clothes.

“Honey, please stay. Let's talk about this. Please don't go.”

But I can't stay. I've given enough. I've gambled with happiness and he's pushing me for something more.

I gather all my clothes and get dressed as fast as possible. Power walk down his hallway to grab my shoes and my bag.

He meets me at the door in his boxers. He runs a hand over his head. “What are you going to do? You can't sleep in your car all winter!”

I open his door and give him one last look. “Watch me.”

I slam the door. My feet are racing out faster than my heart.

What were you thinking? You did a stupid thing. This was too fast. He wants too much. How could he ask me that? He doesn't know me. He doesn't know what I need.

I stumble on a pebble, my bare feet stinging with pain.

What if he's willing to give me everything?

The little fairytale voice always has to make an appearance. But my realist-self slaps that notion right out the window. I never get everything. People take from me and they leave me. The happily ever after was never meant for me. The sooner I embrace that, the sooner I stop deluding myself.

I struggle with unlocking the car door as I look around my car. I need to get set up for tonight. It's going to be a cold one.

Henry is out the door running towards me in boxers, tennis shoes, and nothing else.

I get the door open and lock myself inside.

He leans close to the glass. "My house is always here for you. I'm always here for you. Zetty...please..."

But his begging only tears me apart. I'm too far gone into my own world. The one I have to keep safe to protect myself.

I push on the gas and squeal away down his street as tears flood my face.

But this time, I'm the one leaving.

My mother taught me well...

CHAPTER 7

HENRY

I COULDN'T SLEEP LAST NIGHT. I WENT OUT TO MY CAR several times and was going to drive around Everville until I found her. The town isn't that big, but I didn't want to scare her off.

Or what if she left town? Shit. What would I do then?

Tired of staring at my four walls, I head over to one of Perry's new buildings that he's working on. He's focusing on the rooftop garden, and when he gets in that plant-zone, he'll be up there for hours a day for a few weeks, making sure everything is just perfect.

As I take the elevator, I go back and forth about telling him about Zetty's situation.

I don't want to hurt her more than I did last night, but I can't have her out living in her car. Even if she won't accept my help, maybe someone can help her. And who better than the man who has multiple apartments.

Being with her was the best experience I've ever had. I want so much more with her. I want her in my home and my bed. But I want her safe more than anything, even if I don't get those other things. Her safety is the most important thing.

The elevator doors open onto the rooftop, and I spot Perry on the other end looking over some landscape designs as he's potting some plants. These rooftop gardens are his new passion. He's driven it into my head about how we need to do more to plant natives, save the forests, and match the now with the future in terms of planning. I balked at how much he was

spending on this adventure, but he gave me the alternative... he'll find another accountant. Not friend. I'd still be one of those. But he needed someone to be onboard, so I listened and he made sense. We can't just think about today. We need to prepare for tomorrow.

And that's all I want Zetty to know. I want her to today and tomorrow. And I'm prepared for both.

I glance around, and I can see why he likes doing this. He's relaxing up here, with all the greenery and colors strewn all over the place. Better than concrete and asphalt.

Zetty deserves to live in a place like this, if she doesn't live with me.

I decide right then that I will help her, even if she ends up hating me. This is something I have to do. When somebody is in trouble, I help. I took on raccoons for her. I can take on finding her a home.

Perry waves, and I chuckle at the memory of that eventful moment of zombie woodland creatures.

He smiles. "What?"

"She's homeless."

It kills me that I said it like that. My gut plummets, and I wince. I hope she'll forgive me one day, but I care about her too much to keep her in a situation that I think I can help with.

I still want to go after her, but I need a game plan.

Perry's brow crinkle. "Who? And why is it funny?"

"It's not. And it's Zetty. She's living out of her car."

Perry frowns and stands up tall. Dropping the trowel, he forgets everything he's doing.

"Fuck. Why didn't she come to us? We'd let her stay with ___"

"Come on, Perry. This is Zetty we're talking about here. She's proud. To her, this is embarrassing. She's felt like a burden her whole life. Her mother abandoned her here in

Everville when she was sixteen. She doesn't want to be reliant on anybody. Her trust of people is forever shaded by her past."

I choke on my words, but I get them out because they are for Zetty. This is to take care of her, even if she never speaks to me again.

Perry rubs his forehead, ripping off his gloves. "Double fuck! Floryn is going to be so upset."

"I'm upset, too. I love her, and it's killing me knowing that she can be parked anywhere right now or that she'll freeze to death once the winter really hits. It's already in the thirties at night. That can't be good for a person."

Perry sighs and leans against the workbench he has set up. "I have an idea."

"Please, anything. I'm desperate here."

"We've started a new program here at the condos." I get what he's going for, but she'll see right through it.

I shake my head. "That's not going to work. She won't take charity. Hell, she wouldn't take living with me when I really wanted her to."

"I wasn't going to do charity. And you asked her to move in after knowing her for a week?"

I shake my head at myself. "I know, I know. Rookie move. But this isn't about me. Tell me your idea." I motion for him to continue.

"I need a groundskeeper. Somebody who knows plants, and native ones on top of that. The job comes with a condo. And I know just the person for the job."

I grin, and my shoulders drop in relief. Zetty couldn't possibly say no to this opportunity. She won't feel indebted to anybody. She'll be working for it. At least that's my hope. But she has surprised me in the past.

I slap Perry on the back. "Let's bring her home. For good."

CHAPTER 8

ZETTY

I GET ONTO THE ELEVATOR AT PERRY'S CONDO BUILDING. HE asked me to meet him at the rooftop garden. Said he had questions about a couple of things.

Floryn says I'd be able to help him better than she could, which I think is crazy, she's in-house sales, I'm delivery. But I still go.

Frankly, I don't know what is going on. I only know that I'm heartbroken, and the past two days have been sheer torture. After sharing one of the most unforgettable nights of my life, I trampled all over the beauty and the trust we'd built. I desperately want to see Henry again. A significant part of me is afraid to. Maybe I messed it up beyond all repair. I wouldn't blame him if he's mad.

Stupid me also doesn't have his phone number. It'd be easier to text him, but I'm too scared of that.

I know where he lives but facing him shakes my knees.

I still don't have my own address. I've put in for a couple more places. I haven't heard back, so I know what that usually means. I'll be sleeping in my car that much longer.

The doors open, I get off, and four important people in my life are before me—chief among them, Henry.

My heart crashes against my chest at the sight of him. He looks so good, and his kaleidoscope eyes hold my attention for several heartbeats before I shake myself loose from his gaze. My hair, loose and free, floats on the cool fall breeze. I'm not going back to my protected buns.

Well, not never.

Perry, Floryn, and Cali, my boss, are standing next to him. I freeze as I sense that I'm ambushed.

I don't like those. I've been taken by surprise enough in my life.

"What's going on?"

Floryn takes a step forward. "First, we're all here because we love you."

Heat rises to my cheeks, and my heart pounds in my chest.

"You told them!" I glare at Henry.

Floryn retakes the floor. "Hey, when we needed you, you were there for us. It's our turn to be here for you."

I step up, shaking my head. "I don't need your help."

Perry moves next to Floryn and puts his arm around her. My heart cracks a little at not having that. "No, but I need you, Zetty."

I drop my scowl and raise my brow. "I'm not into threesomes, dude."

I try not to let my emotions start on that avalanche. I'll just be a smart-ass, grump.

Henry chuckles and I give him a glare, but he doesn't stop smiling.

Perry keeps his cool. "I need a groundskeeper for this building. The gardens need to be tended to, and I can't keep neglecting my other responsibilities. Especially since I want to build more housing complexes like this one."

I straighten my spine and stand taller. "Would I still be able to work at the shop?"

"You can." Cali says, "We figure it will take you about twenty hours a week to work here, so twenty at the shop, if you want."

Dirty Hoes is my family. I'd hate not to be there and be a part of my family's daily life anymore. I don't have anyone

else.

Perry and I lock gazes. “You’re not just doing this because I’m homeless?”

He rubs his hand on his neck. “Well, it comes with strings.”

Of course, it does.

“Like?”

“One, you need to stay on site. So you’d get a small apartment.”

I knew it—another ploy. A trap. Their M.O.

I open my mouth, but Floryn grabs my hands and holds them.

Closing my mouth, I take several breaths. Henry hasn’t said anything, but I can sense his gaze burning a hole right through me, wanting to get through my shields and caress the core of me.

Perry continues, “Two, you get paid for your work.”

I look out over the garden. This place is too classy for the likes of me.

“I can’t afford—”

Floryn jumps in, “And three, you start to understand how much you mean to all of us and stop holding people at a distance. We’re not going anywhere.”

I cover my mouth as my chest hiccups. I want to cry, but I hold the emotions in and smother them, but is that healthy or what I need?

Florin’s hand squeezes the one hand that remains in her grasp. “Zetty, you’re our family, and we’re yours. Families love and take care of each other.”

She radiates love toward me. Perry keeps his brow lifted, waiting for an answer. Cali smiles at me. Eager for me to accept. And I can’t stop it anymore. Tears fall over the bottom ledge of my eyes.

Henry watches me, and I ache for him.

I whisper, “Are you, my family, too?”

“I would *love* to be your family.” With no hesitation, he blurts out. No second guessing and I can feel the love in his eyes. It was there before. It’s there now.

“I can’t move in with you.”

He comes to me and wraps me in his arms. I melt into him and surround myself with his sweetness, scent, and security.

“I know,” he says into my ear. “I’ll never force you into something you don’t want to do.”

We hold each other, and I take in the moment. Something I’m so grateful to experience. Just like two nights ago, in his arms, I’m cherished.

I lift my head and notice that we’re alone.

“Was this your idea?”

“Technically, it was Perry’s, but everybody has your back. All the Dirty Hoes wanted to be here, but we didn’t want you to be overwhelmed. We want you to feel cared for. Because you are, Zetty.” I smile, and more tears escape.

“What about you?”

He smiles and swipes the tear with his thumb. “Me? I love you.”

I gasp. My lips flounder around like a fish.

“Henry, I’m a cactus. It’s hard to get to my center because of all my prickly points from my past.”

My heart sags. I can’t ever have it be just easy.

“Zetty,” he cups my cheeks. “I’ll be careful with you. I don’t mind getting pricked from time to time.”

I stare into his magnificent eyes, and I lose myself for once. “You’ve helped me to bloom.”

He smiles down at me. “Bloom, baby, bloom.”

He slowly lowers his head, and I lift mine, our lips meet again, and my world has righted itself.

EPILOGUE

HENRY

TODAY IS THE DAY.

For some this wouldn't be a big day. For some they'd say, *who cares?* I do. I care a lot.

It's been eighteen months since Zetty moved into the condo building and today...today she's moving.

To live with me...across the hall in a nice three-bedroom condo.

It was the logical next step. She's attached to the building and wants to maintain that connection. But I need to be with her. I've waited and been patient, so I offered up the logical step. She agreed.

Floryn walks in with another box of...plants. "I'll put them in the room." She chuckles as I shake my head.

How many plants you might ask? Enough for one of those bedrooms to be filled. They are her babies.

Will I ever propose to her? I don't know. We're good the way we are. I'm not sure it's needed. We both agree we're in love and we want to be together forever, but does that need a ring and vows, maybe...maybe not.

She steps in with a platter of assorted cactus and I laugh.

"Careful with those. They're dangerous." I hold up a finger like I've been pricked.

"No worries. I know not to grab them like a Neanderthal."

I laugh. I kiss her cheek as she sets the platter onto the granite countertop.

She blows out a long breath. “Wow, I’m so tired today.”

“Do you want me to hire a couple of people to finish it up?”

She sits on a stool that came from her apartment. Half her stuff, half my stuff. “No...I think it’ll subside soon.”

Floryn comes out of the bathroom, a shit-eating grin on her face, holding her hands behind her back. “You okay, Zetty?”

Zetty looks over at her and her mouth drops open. “Fuck. You know.”

Floryn squeals and I’m lost. My gaze bounces between the two of them.

“What’s going on? Are you sick?” I ask.

Floryn pulls something from behind her back. “Don’t leave the evidence on the counter!”

“What is that?” I ask, squinting toward the white stick in her hand.

Zetty stands and walks to me. “I was waiting until we were alone, but I guess some people aren’t going to let that happen.” She glares at her friend.

“What’s wrong? *Are* you sick?”

How did I miss the signs? She should be in bed.

“Not exactly sick. More like surprised.”

Floryn squeaks and I see her crying.

“Jeez. Just tell me. We can make it through anything, Zetty.”

“I’m pregnant. And of course, you’re the daddy.”

The world takes a quick spin under me and the sides of my vision blacken. I shake my head to fight a quick trip to the floor. I grab the edge of the island.

“A baby?”

“Yeah. A baby.”

Now Floryn’s bawling and Perry steps into the kitchen. “Hey guys.” He beelines to his wife. “What’s wrong?”

She blubbers the news.

“What?”

“I’m pregnant!” Zetty calls out.

“Congratulations!” Perry says and fist bumps me. “Nicely done.”

Delia, our coworker, Cali, and Mari all come into the room.

“What’s going on?” Delia asks, setting down a box of... plants.

I lift Zetty into the air. “We’re having a baby!”

Her plants might have been her first babies, but this one will be all ours.

Everyone cheers and Zetty rolls her eyes as she slips down my front.

I whisper in her ear, “Marry me.”

It’s not a demand and it’s not a question. It’s what’s in my heart.

She smiles and whispers against my lips. “Yes, I love you, Henry.”

“And she’s going to marry me!”

The room erupts. Hugs all around and the women starting to plan a wedding. I’ll want that baby to have my last name, as well as the mother.

Perry slaps my shoulder. “Let’s all go to Sip Happens for some champagne!”

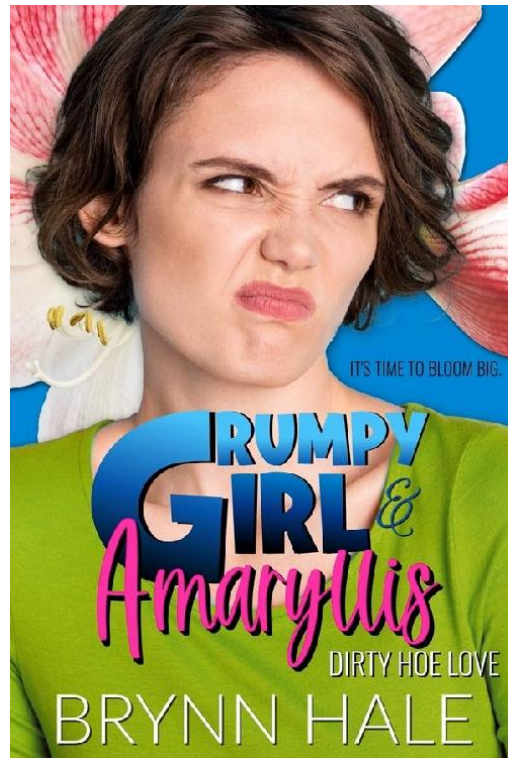
I look to Zetty. “Thank you for trusting me.”

Her glossy eyes hold to mine. She’s not afraid to cry anymore.

“Thank you for showing me there are people worth trusting.”

Thank you for reading. We’d love to hear what you thought in a review! [Grumpy Girl & Cactus](#).

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It’s time to bloom big, baby!

Mari

Single mom. Not struggling, but stuck.

Stuck wondering if I should start dating and how do I do that.

Stuck finding a way to move on without affecting the kids.

And stuck learning how to be me again.

My childrens’ teacher asks me to come do a talk on plants, I’m thinking it’s all business.

When I’m finished, I’m surprised when he asks me on a date.

I’m not sure I’m ready, but Croix is as different as his name.

He's quirky, nerdy, and the polar opposite of my ex.

Can I get un-stuck and find me again...with him?

Croix

Thanksgiving is approaching and my class is starting to get cabin fever.

I need to mix it up.

When Iris and Ash, twins in my classroom suggest bringing in their mom, I stop by Dirty Hoes Plants & Decor.

I'm instantly taken with the tall, voluptuous woman who helps me pick out a plant for the room.

The fact she's Iris and Ash's mom makes my feelings toward her a little tricky.

Teachers are discouraged from dating parents...it's just not a great idea.

But Mari is too special to let this moment pass by.

She's like the flower she sells me, afraid to open and bloom.

But I'm going to help you find yourself again and you'll bloom baby, bloom.

This is a steamy short story romance. No Cliffhangers. No Cheating. Happily Ever After Guaranteed. Grumpy Girl & Orchid is the first in the Dirty Hoe Love series, but all in the series can be read as standalone stories. If you crave short romances with steamy scenes, women getting what they need and want, a few laughs, and a happily ever after, then you'll love this story.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Brynn Hale is a Midwest girl who can spot—and swoon over—a hard-working guy a mile away. She believes in winks across a crowded room, guys who do the dishes, a blue-collar alpha will always win a heroine’s heart, and a martini or craft beer is the perfect accompaniment to her stories.

You can visit her at:

