

IT'S TIME TO BLOOM BIG.

RUMPY
GIRL &
Amaryllis

DIRTY HOE LOVE

BRYNN HALE

**GRUMPY GIRL &
AMARYLLIS**

DIRTY HOE LOVE

LAST CHAPTER PRESS LLC

BRYNN HALE



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GRUMP GIRL & AMARYLLIS INFO

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 Irish 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.

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MARI

I HUFF AS ANOTHER PRECIOUS PLANT FALLS OFF THE WAGON carrying an assortment of plants. This time though, I'm not at my shop, *Dirty Hoes Plants & Décor*. Usually I have many items bogging down the wagon and keeping it solidly on four wheels.

“Not today,” I sigh. “Because I'm being the good mom.” Even if some people disagree with that status.

Bending over, I pick up the sad heartleaf philodendron and scoop up the soil that came out as best as possible, leaving only a few flecks.

I whisper to the plant. “Sorry, philodendron Hederaceum. You're my favorite, but don't tell the others, I'm afraid they won't believe you.” My plants are my life partners, and now that I think that statement, I probably sound quite lost in my mind by talking to them.

Irritation floods my body, but I compress my grumpiness, like always. The two cups of coffee this morning haven't ever cured me of the annoyance of singlehood and it's not helping me handle the fact that I'm going to face thirty third graders and endure the heckling that comes along with that.

I stop my thinking process. Two years of therapy has had some lasting effects. My children are *not* an inconvenience or chore. They are 100% my greatest joy. Doing this presentation at their school is an honor as their mother. At least I have something worthwhile to discuss, and that they want me here at all is a precious and cherished gift.

So what if *Dirty Hoes* are heading into the holiday season, and the store needs me there with how chaotic it can be. My kids are only children for so long.

“Do you need any help with that?” A deep husky voice hit my gut like a sledgehammer. A voice that has a sexy rumble to it. Lifting my gaze to the man approaching, I can’t help but appraise how his body matches his voice—and part of me rumble to life that haven’t in a very long time.

Heat rises to my cheeks as the blonde-hair, blue-eye Calisurfer look is an intriguing sight in the middle of North Carolina—a ways from the beach.

The best part is he’s the polar opposite of my ex.

The toad of my past.

“Thank you. I’m supposed to do a speech here in just a few minutes and I’m running behind. Like always.” Though everything is corrected, I drop my gaze and work on reorganizing my wagon. My hands need something to do and a moment to calm myself before I make a complete fool in front of the handsome stranger.

Drooling and googly eyes are not attractive traits when meeting a stranger.

“Are you Mrs. Thomas?” he asks.

I cringe at my married name. Once my divorce was finalized, I couldn’t shed myself of that name fast enough.

“It’s Ms. Marcus now, but please call me Mari. My children are Iris and Ash Thomas.” Lifting my hand and wiggling my ring finger to demonstrate it’s empty. “Divorced.”

The man glances down at my finger, and his eyes brighten and he smiles this crooked and cocky smile. I startle at the unexpected transformation.

How weird is that? Do I have dirt on my face?

I stand and with my back turned I slap at my face like a madwoman before turning around and returning his smile.

His eyebrows rise, but he lifts his hand for a shake, I slip mine into the offering, and little zings shoot up my arm. Probably the dry air. We have to have humidifiers running around the clock right now.

He clears his throat and for the briefest of seconds, I wonder if he felt the same electric moment.

“I’m their teacher, Mr. Young, but you can call me Croix.”

Our hands hold a little longer than necessary, our eyes staying locked on each other’s.

What an interesting name...for an equally interesting man.

“You have great kids,” he offers as I drop his hand.

Not able to help myself, I beam. They are my biggest pride and joy.

“Thanks, Croix.” I can’t help but gush about them. “They really are, right?” They’re the one thing I’ve done right, beside starting the plant shop with my sister Cali, in my life—and a bigger joy.

But don’t tell my plants that.

He nods and smiles. “I haven’t met their father, Mr. Thomas, yet. We’ve exchanged emails a couple of times, but that’s all.”

“Lucky you,” I deadpan.

Croix’s brow lifts and he stifles a chuckle. “That bad?”

I talk through a sigh, “Worse, but he’s a decent dad, so it makes up for being a crappy ex.”

“Decent isn’t a very high bar.”

“I’m trying to have low bars when it comes to some people.”

He leans his head to the side, frowns, and looks me in the eyes. “Sorry to hear that, Mari. You deserve to have high bars in your life.”

The way he says my name is soft and warm like a favorite Christmas sweater. His sincerity is like a sucker punch to the

gut. I'm not used to this care from a man.

Ten minutes later I'm giving the presentation, and I'm absolutely thrilled at how the children are reacting and the questions they have. There's no heckling and everyone gets to pick out a small plant from the 1-inch pots I brought along. I love seeing my children and the joy on their faces. It's a proud moment for me.

My excitement gets tamped down a little though by the young and probably too young, incredibly attractive, and utterly too attentive teacher. His gaze and focus on me have butterflies fluttering and flapping inside of me. The teenage girl in me jumps around, clapping and blushing at his appraisal.

I mentally shake the attention off. He's too young in age and maybe name. Croix? What does that even mean? He has to be mid-twenties. Plus, he's my kids' teacher. That's uncomfortable and weird, right? If not unethical or immoral. And I don't need to be giving my ex more ammunition for his challenges to my parenting.

The kids head off to gym class when I finish. Iris and Ash run up to me and give me a hug and kiss, and everything is right in the world.

Croix helps me gather the plants and clean up the small amount of spilled soil and leaves that have fallen off from being handled.

"I've never had a plant before," he says, our hands bumping as we set plants back into the wagon.

"Oh, a virgin. I like those," I blurt out without thinking.

His rich laugh hits me with what I said, "Well...."

I swear even my hair turns beet red. "I only meant..."

"I know what you meant, Mari." His smile blossoms my own.

He leads the way out of the building, being more helpful than I expected.

“Thanks for the presentation, Mari. The kids will be talking about this all afternoon long.”

“Hope that’s a good thing.”

“It’s a great thing. They need to think broader than just what’s on our worksheets today. There’s more to learning than tests and rote learning.”

“Agreed. Thanks for inviting me...Croix.” It’s odd how his name sticks in my throat. Almost like I don’t want to finish the sentence.

He heads back into the building as I walk myself to my minivan.

Stop it. He’s young—and your children’s teacher. And you’re not ready for something... anything.

As I drive out of the parking lot, Croix runs out the door and waves me down.

I frown, looking back, wondering if I have left something behind. I brake and roll down the window.

“Did I forget something?”

His chest rises and falls quickly. “Yes, agreeing to a date with me.”

My eyes pop out of my head, and I stop breathing for a second. *Seriously?*

“Oh, Croix, I don’t think so. You’re my kids’ teacher.”

He doesn’t waste a moment, his large hands grip the edge of the window. “It’s not against the rules, just cautioned. We’re adults, Mari.”

He’s not wrong. His eager face forces me to consider. Plus, the zings can’t be wrong, either.

“Please.” His smile shines. “Plus, I’ll let you take my virginity...plant virginity that is.”

A bubble of laughter rolls off my tongue. “Well, we are the *Dirty Hoes*. We have plenty of experience.”

He grins wide, anticipating my answer.

“Okay.”

He taps the roof of my sedan. “Okay then, Friday. I’ll be at *Dirty Hoes* at five.”

And I’ll be freaking out.

CROIX

IT'S FRIDAY, I'VE BEEN WAITING FOR THREE DAYS FOR TODAY, and I couldn't speed out of the school parking lot fast enough. Well, I still obeyed the traffic laws. Safety first, kids.

Making the drive home in record time so I could take a shower, change into something less teacher—khakis and a sweater, and more date—jeans that I've been told accent my efforts at the gym and a long sleeve, green Henley that I've been told accents my eyes. I'm pulling out all of the stops.

I make it to *Dirty Hoes* five minutes before I'm supposed to, my foot pressing the accelerator of my Jeep Wrangler to the speed limit.

I've wanted to see Mari since she pulled away from me after her presentation. It was strange how my heart ached a little at watching her drive off. From the moment I saw her wheeling in the wagon, Santa and Cupid got together, as Santa-Cupid, to answer my Christmas wish early.

Who knew they both worked so hard during the Thanksgiving season? I'm not going to complain, though.

I've been waiting my whole life for a woman like Mari to cross my path, and now nothing will get in my way. As a business owner she has tenacity and works hard—two things I value after being in the military, and she's a single mom—something my own mother taught me is hard work raising me and my two brothers. Three against one is always hard, but she raised us with laughter and love. The way it should be.

Stepping foot into the jungle known as *Dirty Hoes Plants & Décor*, I can't believe how amazing this place is. A sea of green, with splashes of color from holiday decorations and gifts. My mother would be in heaven here.

Mari holds a couple of plants at the counter and talking animatedly with a customer about their best qualities, like they are living breathing creatures. *I guess they are.*

A large smile graces her face, and it's confirmed. I'm a goner.

And nobody can do anything about it, and if they try, I'm going to put up a fight.

She hasn't noticed me yet, so I take the opportunity to sink my eyes into her delicious curves, ones belonging to a woman who lives life free from expectations that plague some women. That bountiful body is meant to be snuggled, and Mari is the snuggliest woman in the room. I appreciate that she is tall. Her 5'10" fits nicely with my 6'2". Bending over can be a bitch all the time.

Another tick in the box showing Cupid-Santa knows what they're doing.

Mari looks up and sees me watching her. Her full and puffy lips rise just slightly, and my heart speed races to the happily ever after.

I smile back and turn, so I don't appear creepy. Spotting a clearance table, I head over that way. This table is the one for a teacher's salary.

I'm still trying to figure out what I'm doing, picking up plants, looking at them intently like I know what the fuck I'm doing, and putting them back down.

"Oh, I love a *budget* virgin," Mari's voice comes from behind me. Her voice has the sweetest, sing-song quality sound I've ever heard. Hearing her speak in class has kept me going the past few nights and mornings in the shower.

"On my salary, this is probably what I need." I chuckle and set my sights on her once again.

She reaches around me, and her floral scent spikes my blood pressure. Going for a cactus, she holds it up to me.

“Behold the virgin’s plant. It can be ignored after you make it wet.”

I laugh but squint my nose. “I have a cat, Jean-Claude, who would see this as an adversary and go all Kung Fu on it. Maybe something a little less spikey.”

Stepping closer, I let my arm graze hers and inhale her scent. I watch her breathing quicken, but she doesn’t move. I fist pump in the air. Well, in my mind, I do. I don’t want to scare her away.

I grab the closest container because I don’t want to move an inch from her and notice that it has a long stalk and two oblong leaves, but that’s it.

“What’s this one?”

I watch her swallow deeply, then drop her eyes to my hands.

“Amaryllis, or amaryllidoideae, are gorgeous and extremely eye-catching. *Usually*. Cali, my sister and co-owner, ordered these, and this one just hasn’t sent up a bloom. And that’s why it’s on the sale table. I don’t think it’s going to be beautiful.”

Her voice calms, and a hint of sadness tints her explanation. She really cares for these plants and it’s like the plant’s not meeting its destiny.

Baby, I’m giving you your destiny.

Gazing at her face and then at the plant, I can’t help but think it’s already beautiful. It’s perky, it’s towering, and it’s graceful.

And it’s not the only thing in the room.

“They’re kind of a pain in the butt. Actually, I’m going to say it like it is...they’re the high maintenance plant of the plant world. You have to dig them up and store the bulb in cold air for eight to twelve weeks, and then replant them, so they’ll bloom. It’s called ‘forcing’.”

Shit. I'm not up for a needy plant.

“Thankfully, these have already had their cool season, and this one *should* bloom, but like people, they can be stubborn... high maintenance.” She smirks at me, then motions over her shoulder when a bell rings at the register. “Excuse me.”

She walks to the counter to check somebody out.

Holding the plant in my hand, I study the other clearance plants. They all look like they're doing well. Footsteps head towards me, and when I glance up, a woman who looks similar to Mari introduces herself.

“Hi, I'm Cali. How can I help you?”

Her sister. This is where shit can go south. Family can really influence a person.

Not knowing what Mari has said about me or our date, I act like a regular customer.

“I think I'd like this plant.”

Her smile drops and she cringes. “Oh, I don't think this amaryllis is going to bloom. Are you sure you wouldn't want something else? Something already pretty and blooming.”

I shake my head and examine the plant again. “Nope, I'm going to treat this one really nice, and it's going to bloom. It'll blow any other plant here out of the water.”

MARI

NERVES TICKLE AT MY STOMACH AS I SIT ACROSS FROM CROIX. It's not only that he's a good-looking man, but that he's polite and gentlemanly. But with how much I'm staring at him, I can't recall the twenty questions I rehearsed to start conversations. There's nothing I hate more than silence. But I do recall the load of crap Cali gave me in the *Dirty Hoes* breakroom when I went to collect my stuff before heading out on a date.

First Cali was stoked that I was going on a date but then was pissed I didn't tell her. But to be frank, it's none of her business. It's only going to be a quick dinner anyways.

It's not like I'm going to be falling for my kids' teacher. This is just me dipping my toes in the dating pool. Since I haven't been on a single date since my divorce, this is a significant baby step.

So why would I tell Cali about it when in her love-soaked brain, she'd take it to a level I'm not at?

Taking a sip of my drink, I water down my parched mouth. "How did you get into elementary school teaching?"

There you go, Mari, a soft, easy question. Dating isn't so hard.

I'm only a bit rusty. And that's probably why I won't take this to the bedroom. I'm pretty sure parts of me might actually need oiled they're so rusty—like the soft part between my legs. It's been...more than a while. Sure I take the tension off occasionally myself, but that's different.

Just stop, you're making yourself nervous.

Croix leans forward on the table in a relaxed motion as he gives me his undivided attention.

“I was in the military, but a roadside bomb caused major hearing loss.” His hand reaches to his ear and pulls out a hearing aid so small I didn’t even notice he had them. “I’m ninety percent deaf in one ear and about fifty in the other. I had to be discharged. No way I could serve appropriately. What if I lost an aid? It’s just not safe.”

He shrugs his shoulders.

Speechless for a moment, I recover, and sigh. “I’m so sorry, Croix. Thank you for your service and your sacrifice.”

To compromise his hearing that’s a huge loss, and even a sincere thank you, I feel, will never be enough.

He winks and smiles at me. “Thanks. I have a degree in math. I wanted to go into middle school, but this job opened, and I needed to escape the big city. The lights and constant sirens were too jarring, and I wanted to slow down life. Make some changes.”

Watching him brush aside the explanation so easily is an attractive trait. He was given a significant life-altering change, and here he is rolling with it. Does it come with issues? Sure. But he’s making the best of the change to his plans.

He continues, “I enjoy this simple life in Everville. Never thought I would end up in a place like this.” His gaze lands on me, and he stares me straight in the eye. “So grateful that I have.”

My mind spins, and my leg starts shaking out a nervous beat under the table.

“How about you? Why are you a... dirty hoe?” he winks, and I swear he has a star in that eye the way it catches the light and sparkles.

But I still laugh. Hearing people say the name cracks me up. Not one person can say it the first few times without pausing and then slightly speaking the actual name quieter.

“That name.” Shaking my head, I say, “It’s both a blessing and a curse.”

Croix leans back in his chair. “Your sister picked it out?”

I grin wide. Everybody assumes that. “Nope. I did. Let’s just say that it was a big fuck you to my ex. He cheated on me, and I thought it was tongue-in-cheek.”

Croix’s easygoing manner stiffens a little once I mentioned my ex cheated.

“You were calling him out for his behavior?”

“Maybe,” I say coyly.

In my mind, I’m screaming out a resounding yes.

That infectious, boisterous laugh of his comes again. “I think I like you, Mari. That’s great.”

Slowly, Croix reaches across the table and holds my hands. The look in his eye says he’s looking for something more than friendship. My heart and head have a war inside of me. Logic and feeling taking upper hands like a Slinky going down steps.

“You’re a baby,” I state softly.

He sits up from his seat and leans across the table. He kisses me next to my lips, softly, a brushing of just the corner of my mouth. A damn tease he is. And again the zings start zapping me to life.

It takes every bit of self-control not to lick my lips and sigh at the touch.

He moves in closer and kisses under my ear, and whispers, “I’m no baby, Mari. I know what I want, and I want you.”

My heart sputters, and my panties dampen.

Maybe my parts don’t need oiled as much as I thought they did.

CROIX

DINNER IS GOING BETTER THAN EXPECTED, AND I DON'T WANT it to end. I looked into events around town, and I picked this restaurant because it's within walking distance of a walk-thru lights festival.

I read that this show is put up every year after Thanksgiving, and I can't think of a better person than Mari to share it with.

Who knows? This may become a tradition of ours.

She rubs her hands. I stop, and I take my gloves off. "Here, give me your hands."

Without questions, she lifts them, and I put my gloves on her.

"That's nice of you, but now your hands will be cold."

"Don't worry. I'll be fine."

Once her hands are wrapped inside the gloves, I keep one hand, lace our fingers together, and start walking again.

I smile that she doesn't pull her hand away.

We make it to the town square, and I show the online tickets I purchased. I figured it was showing fate that this date wasn't going to end at dinner.

The different colored twinkle lights and designs are stunning, especially with the backdrop of the clear night sky splattered with bright stars.

I couldn't have planned a more romantic space if I'd tried.

“Why no girlfriend?” she hesitates on the question, which I find endearing.

“Mostly new to town kind of thing, but I was also engaged while overseas.” I hate relaying this part, but we have another connection, albeit one I wish we didn’t. I want Mari and me to happen, and there’ll never be a time that I won’t tell her things. Being honest is essential. “She cheated on me.”

Mari stops in place and squeezes my hand. “Wow, that’s a sad thing we have in common.”

I turn to gaze down into her sweet face. “Apparently, it’s not uncommon.”

She bites the inside of her lip. She has so many doubts, but I only have belief that she is perfect for me.

“You like kids?” she asks.

I brush a piece of her hair from her eyes. “Love them. I want a dozen.”

Or as many as she’ll give me, if she wants more

Her eyes drop, and a sad sigh escapes her. “I always wanted more, but my ex said I wasn’t a good mom.” She shrugs as if that is the end of that.

My blood boils, and I want to give this ex a piece of my mind, but I have to be careful. He is a parent, and her kids are two of my favorites in my class. They remind me of her. Cautious and questioning, even a little timid.

I lift her chin with my finger so she will look at me. “Do you know I’ve asked ten moms to come in and give a presentation, and you’re the only one who has?”

She drops her jaw. “That’s ridiculous.”

“You’re not a bad mom, Mari. In fact, your kids insisted I contact you and have you come in. I’m so glad I did. They adore you. The whole time you were there, they glowed. Their love oozed out of them. A bad mom wouldn’t get that reaction from their children.”

Her eyes mist and her love for her children is evident in her reaction.

I look up to give her a moment and smile. Timing is everything.

Mari also looks up, sighs, and rolls her eyes. “Cheesy.”

“I know you know what that is.”

She drops her head and gazes at me in annoyance. “Of course, it’s *Phoradendron serotinum*, commonly known as mistletoe.” A smirk slides onto her lips. “Do you know that name actually means dung-on-a-twig?”

Mari is always bringing out the joy in me as I let out a laugh.

“So we’re going to kiss under poop?”

The smirk she was sporting a second ago evaporates. “Are we going to kiss?”

Slowly, I move in, but not enough to close the distance. She’s nervous and she’s been hurt. I don’t want to spook her. She needs to decide to take the leap on her own.

I thank my lucky stars that I don’t have to wait long. She leans in and closes the gap, fusing our lips together.

My body rockets to life at the sweet, soft kiss we share. I keep my hands to myself, even though I crave and itch to map her body with my hands. But we’re in public.

Who’s to say one of my students won’t come walking by?

The kiss continues, and I can’t help myself. I wrap my arms around her and pull her in tight. She whimpers, and my body reacts.

Okay, I need to stop before I scare one of my students... or Mari.

I don’t remember a time I’ve gotten so hard from a simple kiss, but then again, I’ve never had a kiss from Mari.

It certainly won’t be the last.

MARI

WE GET COMFORTABLE ON MY COUCH, AND I CAN'T FATHOM how we got here. I must have been struck by lightning because I invited him back to my house. *Wait, my house? Oh, crap, my house!*

This isn't a wise thing to do. He's my children's teacher. But I have needs and desires and he's stoked some burning embers inside of me. A woman always has needs, and mine haven't been met in a long time. Long before my marriage even ended.

The age gap is another concern—of the million I'm always facing. But right now, I'm a single mother with a younger man. Granted, how much younger... I don't know. I haven't had the guts to ask because I don't want to be disappointed. And part of me doesn't want him to be disappointed either.

He discusses little things, nothing in-depth, and I watch him talk, loving the feeling I get being with him. He makes me feel seen. And that's something my ex never did. Just the way he looks at me, his gaze bouncing between my eyes, I'm desired. That's a heady experience. One I've never had before.

Even with those feelings, I make a bargain with myself. If he is under 30, then it has to be a hard no. I'm 36, and it would just be creepy. Sipping the glass of wine I'd poured for us, I nearly choke thinking about it.

I can't take it anymore, and I rudely disrupt him as he talks.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, Croix, but I have to know. How old are you?”

“Twenty-nine,” he says like it’s tattooed on his forehead.

I gulp and back away on the couch. Figures. This is my luck. He’s too young for me.

He follows me and moves closer to me on the couch. His warm hands cup my cheeks, ensuring I don’t stop looking at him.

“I’ve lived a life already, but what’s age but a number, Mari? I’m thirty next month, Christmas Day, actually. I’m not as young as you were imagining.”

I blush. The calculations were going off in my head. “So, you’ll be thirty in less than thirty days?”

His head cocks to the side. “Does age matter to you that much?”

My shoulders slump, and I lean back into the couch cushions. “My ex left me for a twenty-one-year-old.”

The shame of admitting that engulfs me. He said that I was a has been hottie, that I’d outlived my looks. At thirty-six!

“Mari, I’m sorry he did that. You know that no matter what age she was, he was the jerk, right?”

“I do, and don’t get me wrong. You’re great, Croix, but I’m having some weird flashbacks.”

The pain that hit me when I realized my husband saw me as replaceable by someone who was closer to my children’s age than mine is a raw wound.

His hands reach my shoulders, and he turns me back to face him. “Maybe I can help you forget those thoughts.”

His long fingers massage my shoulders and scoop up my neck until they tangle in my bobbed hair. He works them over my scalp, and I sink into his hold. The touch is fantastic. I can’t remember the last time I was intimately touched. Zips and zings ricochet through my body, collecting in one place deep and low inside of me.

I close my eyes and moan at the attention. His breath hits my lips, and his soft lips connect to mine. He gives me a few pecks, then the tip of his tongue traces the seam.

I gasp, and he dives in, rolling his tongue around my mouth, seeking me out. Daring me to come out and play.

Letting the feelings take over, I move closer to him and let my hands roam over his taut body. He is so solid, hard. His large shoulders, ones I can grip onto make me giddy inside.

His hands leave my hair, and he grabs my hands, holding them above my head as he kisses down my jaw and neck and lands on my heavy breasts as he sucks the peaked nipples through my shirt until I'm squirming. I thrust my chest forward hoping for closer skin-to-skin attention, but he only chuckles.

"Croix." I mewl as I rub my thighs together for friction, hoping to ease the pulsing that's starting.

He lets go of my hands and cups a breast in his palm, then slowly lifts my shirt, but before he pulls it over my head, he eyes me for permission.

I bite my lip and nod.

"Good girl." He smiles and has my shirt off. His face buries quickly in between the two mounds, lips caressing the skin. He pops one breast out of the bra's cup and sucks on the nipple, then does the same to the other.

My breathing labors at the need that rockets through me.

"You. Shirt. Off." I gasp as I pull at his shirt, a frantic need that I should question, but it feels too right.

He stands back, and I cry at the loss of his heat, but I don't whimper for long as his shirt is thrown off, and he has his pants, shoes, and socks gone in a flash. Then he's leaning back down, ravishing my chest once again, settling himself between my legs and rubbing his bulge against my core.

Moans break away from me as he hits that spot just right. I start cursing the layers between us. It's been too long, and I

need him inside me. I need to be filled in only the way a man can do. That connection, the bonding of two bodies.

I wrap my legs around his waist and move up and down against him.

His mouth leaves my breast, and he attacks my mouth again, but his palms cup my ass and hold me tightly against his hips, and he grinds down hard against me.

“Ahhh. Oh fuck...” The pulsing between my legs is now at a fever pitch.

He doesn't let up, and I'm so close, but I don't want to come like this. I want to clamp down on his cock inside of me. It's a feeling I don't want to miss.

I end the kiss and unwrap my legs. Croix looks down at me with questions in his eyes. He opens his mouth, but I place my finger over his lips. I stand and reach for his hand and lead him to my bedroom.

I want the whole act, not just a quick release on my couch.

I want it all from this man tonight.

And tomorrow...well, that remains to be seen.

CROIX

WATCHING HER LEAD ME INTO HER BEDROOM, I CAN'T BELIEVE my good fortune. I've tasted her skin, those pink and perky nipples, and I can't wait until I get to the main course. Her moans and responses will be my undoing.

When we reach her room, she turns around and bites her lips as she slowly undoes her pants and lets them pool at her feet. She fidgets, which makes her more endearing to me. She shouldn't have any worries. I don't want her for just tonight. I want her forever.

I vow to make her never second-guess how beautiful she is. Because, in my eyes, nobody can ever compare.

Shaking, she lifts her hands behind her and unclasps her bra, and the pale pink material floats to the ground. Her large breasts beckon for me to restart what I was doing earlier.

Her skin is flushed with a glow, and I lower my gaze to the juncture of her thighs, and I wet my lips at the spot on her soft pale pink underwear, soaked and dark with her juices.

My cock twitches in my boxers, and slowly she lowers her panties to the ground. Her insecure striptease has me harder than any seductive dance by a professional could ever possibly do. She is all I need, all I want.

“Fuck, Mari.”

She coyishly smiles. “Isn't that the idea?”

I growl, launch into her, claim her mouth and her as my own. My hands roam over her.

Her hands do the same, and before I can calculate what is going on, my boxers are at the bottom of my feet, and I step out of them quickly.

I pull her body against mine, skin against skin. Her soft curves against my hard contours make life bearable now.

Even since the military, everything has been challenging and confusing. I'm due for some softness and calm in my life.

I rest my hand on her core and spread her softness to feel her heat and slickness. She's drenched, and my mouth waters.

She squirms and moans against my mouth as my fingers play. I need her ready and close because I hate to admit that as soon as I'm inside her, I won't be able to hold on for long. I crave her too much and when something's right, like this is, no amount of willpower will hold out.

Her hand wraps around my length, and I hiss against her, slowly rocking my cock into her stroking.

“You're so big.”

I'll admit, hearing that, makes me think that her jerk ex didn't measure up, and the thought will make me chuckle every time I see him.

I slide my hands faster against her and dip my finger inside her.

Mari's hold on me is crazy good, and I need her pussy wrapped around my cock. Taking me in deep.

“Mari, you're so wet for me. God, I want you.”

“Yes, take me, Croix. I need you.”

No more. I lift her hand from me and lay her down on the bed. Opening her thighs, I revel in her shimmering pink lips, which makes me groan.

I glance up at her wanton face, and there is no hesitation or questioning, only need and want for me. I will make sure she looks at me every day like that.

Grabbing hold of my cock, I line up and twirl my tip along her clit.

Her belly spasms and a long moan rolls from her luscious, puffy lips as I remind myself that I'm going to kiss her senseless every day to have those lips looking back at me like that.

I scoop some of her wetness with a finger and rub it over my dick to guarantee I'm well-lubricated for her. Slowly I push my way into her, and both of us can't hold back our bliss. I make it to the root of my cock, fully staked inside my woman, and I can't help the fist pump in my mind as I grip her hips tighter.

I stare down at her curves, and I salivate at the bouncing of her breasts I'm going to make.

“Ready, baby.”

She nods frantically and moves her hips. “Please. Oh, God...please!”

I pull out and thrust back in fast and hard, keeping the pace. She exhales loudly, and her breasts bounce just as I imagine they would.

I bite my lip, imagining the day that her mouth will be wrapped around my thrusting cock.

“Croix, yes. There. That's it.”

Knowing I hit that spot for her, I focus on hitting it every time.

My balls start tightening. I work her clit in time with my thrusts.

Her head shakes back and forth on the bed, her cries get louder, and her pussy tightens on me. She's close.

I'm close.

We're close.

This is going to be another explosion that will affect my life forever.

“Oh, Croix, yes, yes, yes,” Mari screams as she falls over the edge, shaking from the inside out, until she softens like putty in my hands.

Gritting my teeth, I hold onto my release as I thrust through her orgasm to maximize her enjoyment. It's all for her now and forever. As soon as she calms down, I lean down, resting in a push-up above her, feet firmly planted in the floor, and I slam short hard thrusts into her until my balls tighten and snap, and I release my seed deep into the core of Mari.

I can't help but offer small light pumps as her walls clench around me, and I jerk every bit of tension from my body.

I rest on top of her to catch my breath. Then slowly extract from her and head to the attached bathroom.

I make it back in time to clean her up and then myself.

Not wanting to waste a moment, I rush to her and curl around her, holding her in my arms.

In the calm of the late evening, she whispers, "I'm told I'm hard to love, but you're easy to love, Croix."

My heart smiles, but I don't say anything. She thinks I'm asleep. With the bit, I know of her, she wouldn't confess that unless she thought I wouldn't hear her.

At least not yet anyway.

And I'll keep her secret close, just like her.

MARI

CROIX WRAPS HIS ARMS AROUND ME AS WE FLIP PANCAKES ON the griddle and turn the bacon over. He kisses my neck, and I can't help my giggle at the tickles his morning stubble incites.

This is fun, almost picture perfect, and I can't help but remember the sunrise lovemaking we already enjoyed. If I'm extra sweet, maybe I can get a repeat performance with him before he has to leave, and my kids come home from their father's.

The front door opens, and Ash comes running into the house.

Croix and I leap away from each other.

"Mr. Young?" He skids to a halt. "What're you doing here?"

Shock, fear, and embarrassment rack through me as my son eyes his teacher in our kitchen.

"Your mom asked me to help her make breakfast."

I let out a sigh at his quick reply while I stay froze in place. Thankfully he didn't lie to my son either. That's the truth. I invited him to stay for breakfast and now it's something I'm regretting. I should've known my Dave would drop them off early. He's always in a rush to get somewhere.

"Cool, can I have some?" Ash seems oblivious to what's really at stake here.

"Of course, sweetie. Where's your dad?"

“Outside, getting Iris’s dance stuff out of the truck.” My son frowns, and my heart drops. “He’s grumpy today.”

And that will most likely lead to me being grumpy, too.

But I can’t let him get into the house. There’s no telling what he would do.

I kiss my son’s head. “Figures,” I mutter under my breath. “I’ll be right back.”

I’m eyeing Croix and biting my lip as I work up the courage to see my ex. It always takes way too much out of me and I need to stop that. He’s not worth the worry, but when it comes to my kids, I have to keep the peace.

He smiles and pushes his hand forward. “I got this.” Bacon pops on the stove, and he drops the spatula. “Promise, I got this.”

I bite down on my laugh and kiss Ash’s head again.

Outside, Dave slams the truck door. I watch him as he, with his receding hairline and slowly descending beer belly, wrestles with our daughter’s bags.

“Seriously, Iris, next time, don’t bring all this shit over.” His eyes are hard, and his mouth is pinched.

My sweet girl’s face is crushed, and she doesn’t look up. “But, dad, I love to dance. I need it.”

“It’s a waste of time. Concentrate on school. That’s what’ll get you places, not tap dancing your way across the stage.”

I huff and cross my arms. It’s times like these that I wonder what has happened. Had he always been like this, and I didn’t see it? Or did this grow and come out of nowhere? No, it was there. He could always dish the advice, but taking it, hell no. He was Mr. Fucking Perfect.

All I know is I’m thankful he’s not my mess anymore. I’m only saddened for my kids because he never used to speak to them like this. He’s gone into a whole new arena of asshole.

“Hello, Dave,” I say, trying my hardest to be respectful. Especially in front of my kids. I won’t poison them against

their father. He is doing enough on his own to separate himself from them. He has to remember that they won't be kids forever and will come to their ideas on how they want a relationship with him. And all I'm seeing is holidays and maybe birthdays in his future, not a random call to talk in sight.

Leaning over, I kiss my daughter. "Hi, sweetie, why don't you go inside? Breakfast is almost ready."

She nods and doesn't say goodbye to her father.

Even now, he doesn't notice that his daughter didn't even say goodbye, even though they won't see each other for several days. Or the fact that he is dropping them off early, practically missing out on a whole day with them.

I have them for as long as possible, dreading when I have to drop them off with him.

Dave grunts and shoves a bag at me.

Once Iris is in the house, I turn on him. "You could at least be cordial. And you need to stop being so grumpy with the kids."

He sneers at me. "I'll be and do whatever I want. Whose car is this?" Nodding toward Croix's car on the street parked in front of my house. He took the big five bedroom in the suburbs and I found a three-bedroom rental. He was always so proud of that house, but never of his family.

My blood pressure rises. Glaring at Dave, I give him the answer he needs. "None of your business."

His face turns red. "I want to know who's around my kids."

"Well, if you weren't here six hours early, he'd be gone." I clenched my fists at my side.

Shit, I've done it now. I admitted the secret. Dammit. Why can't I keep my cool around him? Because he's trained me to lose it so he can feel superior, that's why. But this time is different, I didn't break down. I broke out. And it actually feels pretty damn good.

His face is scarlet, and I swear steam pops out of his ears like one of those cartoon characters that just lost the mouse in a piece of cheese. He isn't used to my smart mouth, and I enjoy myself for the moment.

Dave's eyes widen as he watches the door.

"The kids' teacher?" He spits out, "What the fuck are you thinking?"

Croix throws out, "Everything okay?"

Hating that Croix stepped outside, my courageous bravado distinguishes faster than it ignited. This spiteful man could take my kids away from me. He's threatened it over and over. And I won't jeopardize them. Losing them would be the worst thing that could ever happen to me.

"I gotta get back inside."

Dave leans forward, "Oh, it will be. I'm going to let my lawyer know I'm going for full custody."

My stomach bottoms out. This roller coaster ride is not for me. Turning from my ex-husband, I start to head toward my front door.

I wish it was, but nothing is okay and it probably never will be.

CROIX

VOICES OUTSIDE ARE GETTING HEATED, THE KIDS LOOK AT each other, and sadness envelopes their faces.

I can also tell that the voice rising is of a man, which doesn't surprise me. Mari doesn't have that in her. She's more of a 'let's talk this out, I'm disappointed' type of person, not a rash, angry, shouting type.

God, I hate that type.

My father, the General, was one of those. He was so proud when I went into the military and then equally as disappointed when I was released. Apparently, I should have "faked" being able to hear to stay in. *Exactly, how does someone do that?*

The way the kids are reacting, which I haven't seen them do before, they aren't strangers to this interaction with their parents. I haven't seen them with their father, so this could be how they are with him, which saddens me. However, I also understand the tension. It was one of the reasons my mother left my father.

Watching them with their mother, they clearly adore her and can't stop talking about her. I get it because I'm taken with her, too. And I've only been in her presence for a short time, a few amazing days. And in a handful of meaningful hours, she has impressed me as a person who cares and my feelings for her have grown like the plants in Dirty Hoes, I'm a jungle of love inside. I can't help but fall for her. She makes it so easy.

I think over my conversations with the kids and realize they don't mention their dad very much. They only talk about

him if asked directly.

Turning off the stove, I turn to the kids. “Ash, can you set the table?”

“Sure.”

Iris’s soft excited voice says, “I’ll help, Mr. Young.”

“You both can call me Croix outside of school.”

The kids have puzzled looks on their faces, and they eye each other. It didn’t last long, though.

Ash’s shoulders shrug. “Cool, Croix!”

I pat their shoulders as I walk by them, and they start setting the table. At the front door, I look out, and Mari is folding in on herself. Her arms are wrapping around her front, and her face is despondent.

Anger builds inside of me, and I hate seeing her this way. There is no reason for her to be like this.

I step out of the house. I don’t want her to think she is alone anymore because she’s not. I’ll always be at her back.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

Mr. Thomas looks at me and mumbles what sounds like, “Oh, it will be.” Then he leans over to Mari, they are almost the same height, and he says something.

Her body stiffens and her ex marches to his truck, gets in, and peels out of the driveway.

Mari walks to the porch, keeping her head down until she reaches me, then looks up.

Her eyes have deadened in the moments she spent with her ex. Her voice falls flat. “I need you to leave. I can’t do this.”

My heart slams against my ribcage, and panic races through my bloodstream. *No. No. No.*

“Mari, wait, we can work through whatever he said. Let’s talk it out.”

Tightening her arms around her middle, she shakes her head. “He’s going to try for full custody.”

I want to punch a wall. “On what grounds?”

“Whatever he fucking makes up,” she lashes out. It’s good to see a little fight in her, but I wish it weren’t against me, and it was aimed at her low life of an ex-husband.

Not wasting a second, I wrap her in my arms. The safest place I could ever keep her. I would always work to keep her safe. Her body jerks in such a different way that last night and this morning, full of tension and tightness.

“Shhh, hey, it’s going to be okay.” I kiss her forehead.

A slight snuffle leaves her. “Please, Croix, just go. My kids are all I have. I can’t lose them. I won’t lose them.”

I get in one last squeeze, then back away. “Okay, but we’re not over. We just started. This isn’t the end of us. Please promise me, Mari.”

Her eyes drop to the ground. She must have thought I didn’t catch the tear that dripped down, but I caught it.

“I’m afraid we have to be.”

Unfortunately, I heard that.

MARI

THE WEEKEND'S OVER, AND I COULDN'T BE MORE THRILLED about it. Going to work is a great way to distract me from all the thoughts zooming around in my mind like a NASCAR race, around and around and...

Anxiety gripped me so deeply over the weekend that I couldn't be apart from my children. The possibility of losing them shatters me. If that day ever comes, I won't be able to recover. There would be no point.

I try grabbing a pot buried under several others for a plant I need to create a display for. It won't budge.

Yanking and pulling, I grunt, and with too much force, all the pots fall from the shelf, and I curse. The saving grace is that they were all plastic and none of our clay or ceramic, so nothing is broken, only a mess that I created.

Sounds familiar.

"What is wrong with you?" Cali startles me as she calls me out. I glance around and notice our other employee's left the area.

I sigh and roll my eyes. "Nothing."

I return to picking up the mess I made when Cali reaches my hand and stops me. "Hey, stop. We can't keep things inside. We promised each other honesty. Remember when I was doing everything?"

You weren't doing everything. But you were doing the most.

Crap. Why does she have to use my own advice against me? It should be a rule that it's not allowed.

Leaning back against the workbench, I slump as my shoulders sag. "Dave's back at threatening to take away the kids."

She blows up her cheeks and when she exhales, she says, "And you know that he's just full of hot air—like my cheeks were, right?"

Ugh. If she only knew.

"Cal, he caught me..."

I let the sentence trail off because I'm embarrassed to be discussing this. It doesn't matter that she is my sister and we are as thick as the leaves in here. It's been a long time and I know she'll freak out. Not in a bad way, but almost in too good a way.

When I don't go further, she elaborates, asking, "Doing what? Drugs? Stripping? Putting up Christmas lights before December first? Whatever it is, it's not enough to warrant taking away your kids."

My soiled hands cover my face as I mumble my response.

Cali forces my hands down. "Say that again, you were mumbling." She has always gotten irritated with me when I mumble. And it's disrespectful. I can't be that person. My ex has ripped my solace and my spine out of me.

"I said I slept with Mr. Young."

Her eyes brighten up, and a huge, toothy smile spreads across her face. "Their teacher? Really? So? Was he good? I bet it was really good. He made you have the big O? Scream the roof down? Toes curl? Oh, sis, I'm so happy for you. Finally, your system is washed away from the dud, and you get yourself a stud!"

My sister does a crazy dance that is a little more suggestive than I am comfortable with. She continues, unfortunately, "A younger one at that. Woo-friggin'-hoo. Tell me how good it was. Remember, we talk. And it's not good to hold things in.

Honesty.” She wiggles her eyebrows at me and clicks her tongue.

I groan at my sister’s antics. Seriously? Can she be even more embarrassing?

“Can you stay on topic, please?” I ask.

“Huh? Mari, this *is* the topic. The most important topic. Your cooter needed some lovin’, and it’s been way too long. I feared it would dry up and crack or be sealed up like the sands of time. The only way to open it was to have an archeologist excavate the poor thing.”

My sister even dares to wave her hands around my lady bits.

“Oh, God.” I groan and move to lift my hands when Cali stops me again.

“Okay, okay. Sis, you need to stop worrying about what Dave has to say and worry more about living your life.”

I throw my hands in the air, using the workbench as a ballast for my ass. “Ash and Iris *are* my life.”

She sighs and leans against me on the workbench.

“They know that. It’s impossible for them not to know that. You are the mother of the freakin’ decade. But now you need to have a life. What do you plan on teaching your kids if you let your ex control your life and decisions? Is that an example you wish to set for Ash and Iris about love and loving yourself?”

I frown at her. She’s giving me serious thoughts to mull over, and I’m not too fond of it. Only because I know she’s right. I like being the right one. She’s the flighty and irrational one.

Not now. The times are a changin’. Crap.

“People see you, Mari, and admire what an incredible mom and business owner you are. You make people jealous.”

I fight back my tears, and in a scared voice I hate revealing, I ask, “Really?”

“Oh, Mar, yeah. I strive to be half as amazing as you because I also know you’re going to be a kickass aunt, too.” She smiles and rubs her stomach.

My jaw drops as I float my eyes to her smirk and her burgeoning tummy, back up to her smirk.

“No way!”

“Yes way!”

I start jumping in excitement and grab my sister in a tight hug. This is the news I needed today—this pure joy and delight with no strings attached. She’ll be a great mom, too. Like me.

“Congratulations, Sis.” I pull her in tighter.

Cali smiles and leans away from me, staring me in the eyes. “Now, what do you want?”

The question of the century.

What do I want?

CROIX

I FINISHED CLEANING UP THE CLASSROOM, AS ALL THE students were picked up, and I got some peace from the day. The closer we are to Christmas, the crazier they get. And I love it.

Standing by the windows, I look out, and the first fall of snow this season comes down. It's beautiful, and when it sticks, it washes away all the ugliness for a while.

My desk has the amaryllis, and it finally bloomed. It's gorgeous, the most beautiful flower I've ever seen, with red and white stripes and big bell blooms. It has a long stem, and the flower showcases its sexy and sweet nature. Who knew a flower could be so sexy?

But every time I look at it, I see Mari. If I were ever to name her as a flower, it would be this beauty.

I glance around the room one last time to make sure everything is picked up and eye Ash's and Iris's name tags on their desks. Irritation and anger still fester at the fact their father tried to get them removed from my classroom. Luckily, he had nothing damaging to report, and since I fought for them to stay, they are still my students.

Appreciation fills me with that knowledge because they are amazing kids, and they are that way because of their mother. With her by their side, they will go places and be people to admire.

Ready to leave, I grab my bag and decide I'll swing by Sip Happens and grab some food before heading home. Cooking

hasn't been a priority as of late. I still get my daily workouts in, but I've been doing more yoga and meditation.

But cooking isn't the same without that special person there to enjoy the meal with. Too much time has gone by, and I'm not going to let this fade away, but I know I need to pace myself. Driving to her house won't help. Texting her would be an abuse of my power for having the parents' information. I'm just living for the hope that she'll come around.

There's a knock on my door, and a head pops in with a bobbed haircut.

"Do you have a minute?" she asks and my heart thumps hard in my chest.

I swallow. *I have a lifetime for you.*

"Sure." I put my bag down and stuff my hands in my pockets. They need to be contained, or I will reach for her, and I don't want to ruin any opportunities at this point. I also have to remember this might not go the way I want it to. That possibility almost takes me down to my knees.

I give myself a small token and kiss her cheek but pull back quickly before letting her floral scent hinder me from being delirious and ravishing her right here on my desk.

"Great to see you, Mari."

"Same, Croix."

She fiddles with her purse over her shoulder, and when she looks up at me, she spots the Amaryllis and walks over to it. A sweet smile peeks out on her face.

"Oh, my God, it's gorgeous." She looks back and the setting of the snow behind her is almost too much for me not to go to her and wrap her up.

"I agree. *You're* gorgeous." I never said I wasn't going to compliment her and say what was on my mind. I'm only refraining from the physical contact as I crave and need.

She tucks her hair behind her ear. "I meant the flower."

I cock my head and devour her. "And I meant you."

Her cheeks flush again, and I smile softly. I love the effect I have on her, and I see it as a good sign that she came to see me and still blushes for me.

She takes a steadying breath before she begins. “Croix, I want to apologize for sending you away.”

“Accepted.”

Her head jerks up, surprised at how easily I accept it.

I never felt ill will towards her and what she thought she needed to do at that time—dealing with an ex isn’t easy, she has her kids to think about. Anybody would need a minute to process and work things out. I can’t hold that against her. I never will even if we can’t be more.

Her hands fidget some more. “And....”

Hope springs to life inside of me. I step closer, hanging onto whatever she is going to say next. “And?”

Letting out another big exhale, she’s so endearing. “And I’d like us to start over if you’re interested.”

I expected something else.

I glance out the window, and the snow is falling faster outside, a pure snow globe of wonder. The beauty is overwhelming, and I take a moment to cherish how I feel.

“What if I can’t do that?” I ask.

The air leaves her body, and she slightly drops. A small, sad smile lays across her lips, working at hiding the instant sadness. “Oh, you’ve moved on? I didn’t know...”

“No, Mari, I’m in too deep...with you. I love you, and I can’t take the feelings or words away. I loved you the first day meeting you. I loved you when you told me about the poop on a stick. I loved you when we made love and you bloomed in front of me. I heard what you said. *You* are easy to love, Mari. I haven’t been able to do anything since I met you other than think about you.”

She smiles as tears fall like the snow outside down her flushed cheeks.

“And I hadn’t taken my hearing aids out, obviously and I heard you.”

“I wondered.”

I step closer to her again. “And I loved you when you sent me away because you love your kids so much.”

She sniffles. “It’s a twig, not a stick, but close enough.”

I take her in my arms and wrap her up tight. I gaze into her eyes. “You heard me, right?”

She gazes back. “You love me?”

“I love you so much.”

“I love you, too, Croix.”

Her lips are all I can zero in on as I lean over and take them into my possession. I give her the kiss of every dream because she kisses me with the kiss of life.

“Let’s go to my place,” I say against her mouth, not ready to lose contact.

“I have the *Dirty Hoes* holiday party to go to.”

Rubbing my hands up her back, “Then let’s go to that.”

She leans back and bites her bottom lip. “You’re sure?”

“Mari, I never want to leave your side ever again. You’re stuck with me, honey.”

She tries to hide her smile, but I don’t let her hide from me. Mari’s bloomed into the woman she needs to be, and I won’t ever let her not shine... our love is beautiful.

EPILOGUE

MARI

ONE YEAR LATER

“Ouch!” Croix grunts.

“I told you to use one of the plastic needles!” I call out from the kitchen.

He’s threading popcorn onto string with the kids to make an outdoor tree for the birds and animals. I told him to use the child-safe needle, but he’s choosing to be the big, strong...and sometimes stubborn...man.

“Mari, I’m really bleeding. I need your help.”

Oh, crap.

I stop stirring the chili and check the cinnamon rolls one last time. It’s a combination my Nebraska grandparents brought into our lives. The savory and sweet are perfect together—kinda like Croix and me.

Turns out our age difference...not such a big deal to anyone but me—in the beginning. Now, I don’t even think about it. He’s mature beyond his years and sometimes I think he’s more adult than I am.

Until he pokes himself and is bleeding all over our beige carpet.

“Coming!” I grab the First Aid kit from the cabinet, but when I turn into the living room, I drop it and my hand covers my mouth.

Standing there are Cali and Quill, holding their baby girl Daisy, Floryn and Perry, Delia and Joel, holding their baby boy, and Zetty and Henry. Noel isn't here, but someone has to be manning the *Dirty Hoes Plants & Décor* store...right?

And there in front is Croix down on one knee, flanked by Ash and Iris on either side.

“What’s going...on?” My chest hiccups between words.

“Mari, this last year has been the best of my life, and I’ve had really bad ones, so I know what’s good and what isn’t.” Croix’s eyes gloss like mine, maybe more. “I love you with every fiber of my being and I want us to be together for the rest of our lives.”

I walk forward and fall to my knees. I’ll never make him beg for anything. We are equals.

“I love you.”

“Marry me?”

I nod. “Yes.”

The room erupts and babies start crying. *Oops.*

We stand and he slips a rock that will make Dave’s eyes bug-out on my finger.

“It’s my grandmother’s,” he says. “I know what family means to you, and I want you to know that you are my family.”

His lips press to mine, our salty tears mixing on our cheeks.

I hear champagne popping behind us as he swings me around.

Our home, a house we own together already, has a huge bay window that’s filled with three levels of plants. And on the bottom, in the center, is the amaryllis that he bought last year.

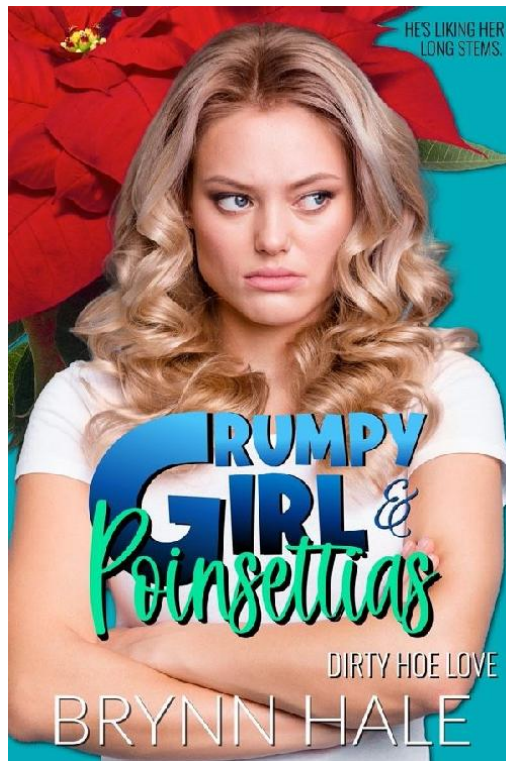
He has babied and cared for that plant every day, giving it the appropriate down time when it needed it. Just like me.

And now we’re blooming.

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

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Out next...



She's had a year, a bad one. He's just an innocent bystander until he tackles a robber. Will she be by his side while he recovers in and out of the hospital?

Noel

You'd think that with a name like mine I'd love the holidays... not so much.

This year's been a doozy. Dumped while on a vacation I paid for, check. Fired twice, check. Took a temp job only to be robbed, check.

Enter Evan.

He takes one for the team, taking the robber to the ground and I watch as the money goes flying, but so does Evan.

He begs me to go to the hospital with him.

He's amazing, but my life is anything but.

I can't change my circumstances, but Evan makes me feel like everything is okay.

But one call, and I'm not okay.

The hits keep coming, and I didn't see this one.

Evan

Just minding my own business and I see a gorgeous blonde screaming to stop this man in all black running right at me.

I play rugby, I can take a hit, but this guy is booking and my head slams to the ground.

When I wake up and she's there in my hospital room, I'm not going to ruin the chance to get to know this beautiful angel.

But that hit to the head was a lot worse than I knew.

I go down hard, again.

Life isn't easy, but I'm willing to take the good with the bad, if Noel is by my side.

My only Christmas wish is her.

This is a steamy short story romance. No Cliffhangers. No Cheating. Happily Ever After Guaranteed. Grumpy Girl & Poinsettias is the sixth 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:

