



The Plant Lady

BY JACKI BENTLEY

THE PLANT LADY

A Short Story

By

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Humming happily as she worked, Kayla McKenzie gently cleaned the leaves and then watered the spiky plant in a round clay pot.

She stepped back to admire her work.

This beauty was a species known by the common name, ‘mother-in-law’s tongue’. Too many with that name. This particular, sturdy cultivar came from South Africa. And the darling was due to flower any day. A red bud stem reached for the light from the floor-to-ceiling window.

Without a sound of warning, Kayla felt herself grabbed off her feet, hefted in the air and thrown hard onto the penthouse suite’s over-sized, unmade bed.

“Hey.” Gasping, she bounced and her breath left her lungs in a long whooshing sound.

Strong male arms held her. The panic eased as she realized he was not hurting her.

But still she struggled to catch her breath and get a look at her assailant at the same time, trying to remember the modest training in self-defense she’d had.

“Who are you and what are you trying to steal?” The man growled the words too close to her ear. A young, tall, well-muscled man.

“Get. Off. Me.”

Still his hold was just a hold, not painful. Yet. A flush of adrenaline pounded through her veins. She heard her heartbeat in her ears.

With her arms were totally immobilized, she tried kicking him away from her, grunting softly with the effort.

“Oomph,” he groaned as she landed a pretty good kick, then he clamped a big thigh over her legs.

“Not stealing. I’m ... I’m here for the plants,” she said. “I thought the suite was empty. I knocked and waited several minutes. As is usual Tropical Interiorscape, Inc. policy,” she added the last formally.

“You come in when no one is here?” He seemed skeptical, not believing her at all. *Did she look like a criminal?*

“Of course I do.” She nodded.

He spoke with possessive authority. As if he was this hotel suite’s occupant. But he was sure not nice, eccentric old Mr. Woolsey. She could see that. Up breath-in-the-face-close like this.

She didn’t think Mr. Woolsey had a son. No resemblance she could see.

Kayla squirmed to cautiously gain a bit of distance from him. His biceps tensed harder, holding her without real effort. Tight in place. Smashed to the comfy boat of a bed.

Darn it, Mr. Stranger smelled really good.

Her shameless body seemed to have no problem responding all sweet and gushy to his overpowering strength.

Designer label slacks, Italian leather shoes and a very nice black polo shirt to finish the look. She wasn’t into fashion herself, but recognized expensive tailoring when she saw it. He looked like a lawyer, or a doctor, a business man, not a crook.

Probably not a rapist, thank God. The stranger was well-dressed and well-groomed but weren’t serial killers often handsome and normal looking guys? That’s what she heard.

Yes, she doubted evil guys like that fit neatly into a profile. They could be as clean and expensively dressed as the next guy. The security here was the best in the world, she reassured herself. All kinds of cameras and gadget out there in the hallways. No one but staff, residents or close friends got in. Ever. This man thought she was the intruder, a thief.

She mentally measured the distance to the land line phone. It’s make a good weapon if not available to her to call for help on. She surreptitiously stretched out her hand, extending her fingers. The darn phone was out of reach.

Meanwhile, his hands moved over her, frisking her like a cop. He seemed to be looking for a weapon on her person. Or for some sign of her ill-gotten loot perhaps.

“Hey,” she said. But she closed her eyes as he came perilously close to stroking her breast. “Stop right now, mister.” She struggled, trying to slap his hands away.

He stopped and looked down at her.

“Do you have a camera hidden on you?”

“Well, that’s a weird question.”

“Do you?”

“No.” She closed her eyes, seeking calm, her body continued to thrum from his touch. Crazy body wanted more. She could not believe she was attracted to the big, nice-smelling jerk lying on top of her so rudely. She’d had no time for any man in her life for a long time. Far too long, apparently.

“Who are you?” he demanded.

“None of your business,” she hissed.

This domineering and imposing, too-damn-pushy guy — was not the one to change her manless status. No way.

Gathering all her strength, both physical and sheer mental will, she shoved against him hard. Once, then again.

Nothing happened. No budging on his part.

“Release me,” she ordered in her best bluffing tone. Her long hair pulled at her scalp, stretching tight from its confining braid as she struggled, strands had pulled loose and curled around her cheeks. She blew away the curls that blocked her vision.

“Answer my questions first,” Big Guy said.

Then he leaned back, looking fierce, angry and suspicious of her motives. Like an ancient warrior. God, he had the sexiest pair of black eyes she’d ever seen. Oh, she knew they were brown but they looked as black as coal. Well-shaped dark, arching eyebrows framed them oh so perfectly.

Kayla was an eye person. Some loved a man’s butt and that was likely cute on this hunk too if she could see it, couldn’t not be, but those eyes held her like the gaze of a snake ready to strike.

“Answer!”

She jumped. Could not even remember his question, too little oxygen in her squashed flat lungs.

“Uh, have you ever heard of positional asphyxia?”

“You’re a damn, sneaky reporter, right?” he growled. But he eased back off her lungs a bit, thank God.

“No. Of course, not. I’m from Tropical Interiorscapes. I assure you mister; I’m telling you the truth. Let me go. Now.”

“What’s this ‘sir’ crap? Don’t expect me to believe you don’t know my name all too damn-fricking well. All you stowaways use my name. As if we’re good friends. Long-time buddies.”

“Uh ... no, sir, I mean... I absolutely *do not* know who you are. There is a sweet, eccentric elderly man in these rooms. A long term resident of the hotel, he told me. He loves his exotic plants. I order them for him. He helps us keep them healthy. I hope I can expect the same from you?” Kayla frowned, striving for a firm authoritative, professional plant care person tone. Grasping for normalcy. Hard to back it up in her current vulnerable position, flat on her back. She knew she began to lose some of her bravado and allow the trapped panic to take hold of her mind.

“Right,” was his only comment. Very doubting that one word.

Anger pushed away her fear. “I’m telling you the truth.”

She was not this man’s servant to be spoken to in this insulting fashion. Problem was, she had not worn her work uniform today, as she and Gayle, her co-worker, were going out for lunch after work.

Mistake. Mr. Woolsey would not have thought a thing of it. She tried to move her legs toward the bed’s edge. One of his larger ones stopped the movement of her own again. Worse now. Now he was very solidly between her thighs.

“Why don’t believe me?” Kayla gave him her best mean look.

With a sudden dark grin he said, “Watch it, cutie, your feathers are ruffling.” His tone of voice had changed. He leaned back a bit to stare at her intensely. Amused now. She ignored the flutter in her stomach region.

“No I don’t believe your story all though it’s the most original I’ve heard from an intruder in a while,” he said. “Tell my why you’re here. You may as well. I intend to call the police one way or the other.”

The man was sexy for sure, but ruthless in protecting whatever he didn’t want reporters to know.

He stroked her cheek. “I admit I find you more interesting than the usual stowaway. Nice little short skirt you have on too. Easy access for a man.” He slid his hand slowly up her thigh, never taking his eyes from hers.

“If women constantly accost and assault you, this is no way to stop them. If ...I mean ...if I were after your handsome bod, you’d be playing into my hands with this manhandling of me this way, right?” she asked, trying to reason him off of her.

His wayward hand moved higher as if he couldn’t resist.

“I guess you’re right, why shouldn’t I allow myself to be caught once in a while? I admit you’re intriguing. Lovely legs.”

“Ahem. Hey!” When he saw her resistance was sincere, he backed off with his hand. “Not what I meant. You misunderstand me. Why do people stow—”

He caressed her hair, lulling her. “Women,” he whispered. “It’s usually women I find in my room. Paparazzi occasionally.”

He moved down, toward her face, closing some of the meager distance between them, unstoppable, inescapable.

“What are you, a crook, a gangster or something?”

He smiled a wild, slashing, evil grin. Darn it, that and his pretty male eyes hypnotized her to stillness. She shook her head, trying to dispel the Svengali affect.

Suddenly, the huge man shifted and clasped her wrists together and shoved them over her head. She felt the coarse brush of the hair on his arms against the underside of hers. Fear returned and instinctively, she pulled and struggled harder, trying to escape his firm hold. “Why did I not listen to my mom when she suggested self-defense classes?” she muttered.

“She should have told you to stay out of a strange man’s hotel room too.”

“Oh, she has some concerns about my job, I assure you. She said it didn’t seem safe enough to her. I assured her the hotel has a great staff. The better to solve my murder.”

Could she punch the man in his handsome, snooty nose if she got free? She didn’t think so. No stomach for it. Besides, he could’ve murdered her or assaulted her by now if he wanted to.

“I have no plans to murder you.”

“Huh. I’m reassured. Let. Me. Go.”

She had to keep him talking, appeal to his sense of reason. He seemed to be genuinely weary of intrusion, rather than dangerous. But help her, he was so close. She could smell his fancy, intoxicating manly perfume so well. She had no time for that kind of fragrance stuff herself. If it couldn’t be purchased at the good old grocery store, or Buy-Mart, she didn’t own it.

“This is, according to you, your hotel suite. But. But, I know Mr. Woolsey lives here.”

“So you here to see Claus Woolsey then?”

She nodded. Then she stared at him wide eyed, as he looped his long, thick fingers in her hair and easily pulled it loose from its banding.

“You have beautiful hair, little intruder. I’ve never seen quite that shade of red before. And I’ve seen a lot of women, believe me.”

She snorted. “I bet you have a winning way with them.”

He laughed and went on caressing the strands with his fingers, sifting and folding them around his fist.

“Plants, I know all about plants,” she puffed. “Ask me something,” she offered.

He laughed again, hard, a harsh rasping sound this time. His laugh sounded rusty, otherworldly almost, unused. “I know nothing of plants, sweetie. It would do me no good to hear you lecture me.”

“Well, alrighty then. I’ll just pack up my tools.” She went limp and tried to scoot out from under him. “That’s right. My *horticultural* tools,” she said with emphasis, her eyes leading him to where her hand clippers lay on the tan carpet. “I buy the best I can afford. Those are German-forged clippers there, not the smashing kind, the clean cut kind.”

“I see.”

Damn him, he fell into a steady chuckle now.

“Are you mad?” Maybe that was it. He’d escaped from a care facility for the criminally insane.

Daniel was amused. Damn the pretty woman. He began to think the redhead was the only human in the world who really didn’t know who he was. Heady, intoxicating thought that. He missed his anonymity like hell. Sometimes traveling all over the world to regain it for a time. But he couldn’t afford to let his guard down with this woman. She could well be a better actor than he was. Not that the critics gave him much credit. He was damn tired of it all anyway. Had enough money to last two lifetimes from the Sci-Fi trilogy he’d just finished. Hadn’t wanted this acting gig anyway. Well-known director, Claus Woolsey, had come to him after a construction job on his fancy house.

He really hated his celebrity, clinched his jaw just thinking about it. He never watched the damn movies after they were made, ruined the movies for him. Ironically, he liked the work part well enough, the money part too, just not the intense celebrity spotlight aspect. He despised the paparazzi and avoided them. Hiding out in Claus's suite had seemed a good plan.

Daniel inhaled the clean smell of the woman and a dark fantasy occurred to him. He'd like nothing better than kidnapping this pretty thing and haul ass to Hawaii for a week or two. They could lie on the beach at his place there and let nature take its course. It'd been months since he'd had a woman in his bed. There were far too many vultures waiting to con him, always wanting something from him, sucking the life from his soul.

Flexing his hands on the fine bones of her wrists, he savored the feel of her. Man, he hated being such a distrusting cynic. She squirmed beneath him and his already racing heart jacked up a notch.

What if this beautiful woman really didn't know who or what he was? And was attracted to him anyway.

He could feel her attraction, sense it, smell it.

Her pulse was flying underneath his fingers and not from fear. It was just too damned good to be true. If he let her up, she'd be gathering her tools and heading for the nearest exit.

"Do you have a boyfriend, honey?"

"Uh, no, no... Omigod," she said in a breathy rush. "Yes! Yes, I do. He's a big body builder type, on steroids. Even bigger and meaner than you are, buddy."

"Have any dinner plans tonight?"

"What? Dinner?"

"Yeah."

"Ahem, well, I usually stop on my way back to the plant warehouse at McDonalds and eat in the van. Oh, I forgot. Gayle and I are going out to eat tonight after work. That's why I'm not in my green uniform shirt with the plants all over it. Why am I telling you all this? Get off me. Please."

"Please? God, I love that word on your lips, darling. I had more the dining room down stairs in mind."

She squirmed harder, arousing him to painful levels. Carefully, testing her, he pressed against her. She closed her lovely eyes and moaned.

When he didn't let her up, she said, "Alrighty, alrighty. Maybe another time then. We'll have dinner. Sure. If you'll just let me go? I tell you what. We'll do that. I'll, ah, I'll call you. I promise."

Daniel laughed, long and hard, his grip loosened a bit, the feel of the laughing alien to him these days.

"Tomorrow night?"

"Why sure."

"This is just too sweet," he said. "You really have no idea, have you?" He let go of her wrists abruptly. She lay there. In shock a moment.

Then she hauled back an arm and smacked his chest. "Owww," he growled at her. Damn.

"Do not look so offended, you had that coming to you. I do know you are way, way too sure I should care who you are, pal," she said. "That I know for sure."

He propped his head on a free arm and said, "Do you believe in love at first sight, my flame-haired sweetie?"

She gasped. "God, no. Not me. I'm way too serious for that kind of thing. Lust, yes, love, not. No. Not much double-blind scientific research done in that area, I don't think but—"

"Marry me, my smart plant lady. I'm lonely, surrounded by hundreds of people but lonely for someone real like you. What's your name anyway?"

"Kayla. I mean...Nonsense. Did you hurt your head on the headboard when you tackled me there? Should I call for a doctor? You do not need to know my name." She firmed up her tone, "Have you escaped the mental hospital, by the way?"

Daniel laughed again, long and hardy. It felt so good to laugh with her. At her, actually. Sort of. Poor kid had had a shock when he tackled her from behind like that. He hadn't wanted to chance her getting away with Claus's valuables. It made no sense, but suddenly Daniel *wanted* to tell her exactly who he was. Brag a little. He wanted her to be impressed with him. Hell, he even wanted her to be proud of him. Yet, he really didn't want her to know. Not really.

"Just a meal," he whispered, coaxing. "Tomorrow." He couldn't resist kissing her ear, then her neck.

She moaned low and sweet.

"We'll meet downstairs," he offered. "Lots of people around to chaperone."

Shaking her head, Kayla was tempted. Very tempted. It was those darn seducing eyes. She could go with him now. Her friend Gayle would understand. She and Gayle could go out any time.

Gosh, he had dangerous eyes. Just like that vampire dude on TV. She remembered his picture from the television guide.

Oh, Dear God.

He *was* that vampire guy on TV.

It was him. She'd only seen the promos. Hadn't had a scrap of spare time to watch the shows though, or she would've watched them. She loved a good vamp story.

"You're ... you're ..."

"Crazy, I know." Then he came closer again, brought her to him, stroking her shoulders, kissing her cheek, her neck.

"Oh, Lord." Kayla inhaled his wonderful scent again, committing it to memory, then brought her hands to his shoulders to pull him even closer than his already too darn closeness. When she didn't jerk away, he touched his lips to hers.

Oh, God in heaven, so gentle, so wet. She closed her eyes and enjoyed him. His lips took hers, guided them, controlled them, parted them, teased with his tongue and her insides screamed with pleasure. Heat poured over her, head to toe. She began to tremble in his arms.

At last he released the mastery over her lips and she took a halting breath. Clinching her fists, she resisted grabbing him to her again. She was molten mush as it was, leaning into him, eyes still half-closed and dreamy.

"Okay, love?" he asked as if they'd been this way together numerous times before. As if he was her lover. In the same tone, he might ask if she'd climaxed for him.

"Oh, mercy," she whispered. Brilliant. Witty. She drew back, blushing wildly, feeling the heat of it suffuse her cheeks. Other personal parts of her were suffused too.

This man was *so* exciting. "No one. Never," she mused, lost in her thoughts and imageries of them sinking into the big fluffy bed, so close.

"Good." He looked proud of himself.

"Things like this do not happen to me. Not Kayla McKenzie, hard working graduate student and exotic plant specialist," she mumbled.

“And I’m shaking all over. Pulse pounding like a wild teen’s. What is it you do to me, my brave, beautiful woman?” He could see them together in rocking chairs someday.

There was a hard knock on the door as if not for the first time. “Plant Service.”

“That’s my coworker, Gayle.” She explained, breathless. “She’s finished her work on the other floors. Ready to go to lunch.”

He moved away from her then, standing up, stuffing his hands in his pockets. “I’ll be damned. You really are the plant lady?”

“Mmm. Yes, yes, I’ve been gardening since I was ten.” She smiled helplessly, her big green eyes round and wide, still a touch of fear in them.

As Daniel watched, she touched her fingers to her lips as if reliving his kiss.

“I’ll just be, uh, going now.” She scooped off the bed.

“I’m sorry, Kayla.” He held out his hand.

“Sorry? Right. Yes. Understandable mistake. Not to worry.” Kayla opened the door and backed out the door while she could. “I get ambushed like this everyday.”

“You do?”

“No, no, just trying for a lame joke here.”

As the door opened with her staff key, her friend Gayle stared and gasped. “You’re that guy... that guy that played the vamp. Dude, where’s your long, sweeping, cool coat?” She made a flourish with her hands.

Daniel grinned. Now this, he was used to. Couldn’t believe he just asked a stranger to marry him. God. If she didn’t sell the story to a tabloid, he’d find her and offer again. Just give her a little time. She’d sell him out. *Vampire attacked me in hotel penthouse suite and then asked me to marry him*, the tabloid papers would read. Kayla could get about forty grand for that scoop.

Sad resignation washed over him. She’d sell him out like most everyone else had. Still, he said, “Kayla, don’t go yet. We need to talk. Get to know each other.”

“You just stay away from me, sir.” she warned.

“Kayla” Gayle began. There was a world of *what are you thinking? Get back in there* in the other woman’s one word.

The vampire guy laughed cynically. Kayla regretted she did not even remember his name.

“That is just no way to treat your betrothed, my sweet.”

She couldn't resist his mood, laughing, she said, “Your type never stays married anyway.”

His face went cold as if pain lanced through him. “What type would that be?” he asked.

“What. Would I be wife number five?”

His expression looked as if she'd hurt him. *Wrong*. She did not have that kind of power over this guy. It was her vivid imagination and a bit of annoyance that he teased her.

“You're too handsome. Too sexy. Too popular and charming with the women,” she provided.

“Damn. You think I'm sexy?” He looked happy again. “That's good for starting a long term marriage. The only marriage.”

“Long term...?” She couldn't resist asking. Meanwhile, a glance to Gayle showed she was looking flabbergasted waiting there at the door.

“Oh, yeah, I come from a long line of folks with fifty year anniversaries. We Brands marry for life.”

“Aww. That's so nice. Wonderful. Good.” She was being hypnotized, seduced completely by his movie star self. Maybe he could wield a thrall just like a real vampire. “I think marriage should last at least that long.”

“Have dinner with me, Kayla?”

“Look, Mr. er... Brand is it? I've figured out who you are after all. Just before Gayle came to the door. So...” She held up a hand when he opened his handsome mouth to speak. “Wait. Let me finish,” she said. “So, if you're attracted, uh, interested in me because I can return your precious anonymity, it isn't true anymore.”

After a long pause, “Insightful logic. You're a wise and honest woman, Kayla. Have dinner with me as we planned.” Another pause. “Please?”

She sighed. “I love that word from your lips. Since you ask so politely, I'd love to have dinner with you.”

“Tomorrow night, then? Here at the hotel.”

“Yes. Tomorrow,” she whispered.

* * * *

But Daniel sat in the hotel restaurant alone for two hours. No sign of his Plant Lady. Could he blame her? No.

“Can I refill your Drink, sir?” the waiter asked.

“No, thanks. I’ve been stood up, Claude.”

“Not you, sir.”

“Fraid so.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“No need. I was a jerk to her. Didn’t believe her word. No better than I deserve.”

“I see.” He didn’t see at all. His polite expression failed to hide the curiosity for more info.

* * * *

When Kayla came to the hotel the next week for watering day, she found Mr. Woolsey back in his suite. He lounged in the chair near the South African beauty, stroking its knobby leaves.

“Ah, my dear, what have you done to my friend?”

“The plant is sick? They sometimes get a virus. It can kill them in hours. Let me see.”

He laughed with glee. “No, no, she reaches for the sun with her flowers in fine form. No. I speak of my human guest from Hollywood. Last week.”

“Daniel?”

“You know his name now? He said—”

She waved a hand. “I knew of his show. I did an online search for him.”

“Yes, yes, modern times. Amazing accessibility.”

“Mind-boggling fan sites.”

“I notice the vampire fiction has a loyal following,” he observed. “Wait until his Sci-Fi trilogy hits the screens. My friend says you stood him up. Says he deserved it though.”

“He did give me a fright. Did he tell you?” She continued her work as best she could considering the distracting topic and the memories of Daniel stirred by the big bed that dominated the room.

“Yes. That he thought you broke in here to steal my valued treasures,” Claus said. “He knows I distrust the hotel safe and prefer the mattress you see.” He laughed at his idiosyncrasy.

She looked at him. Were there treasures in that bed, between the springs and the mattress? She didn't doubt it.

"He did not realize your friendship is one of my most favored treasures."

A lump settled in her throat at the elder man's words. He was so nice, radiated goodness. "Thank you," she whispered.

He clasped his hands together. "Would you consider giving the poor boy another chance, Kayla? For me? So that I can in part repay him all I owe him."

Kayla smiled sadly, shaking her head. "He's so out of my circle of existence it's not funny."

"Oh, on the contrary, my dear. He's very much like you. A normal man. Smart, caring. How many would defend another's treasure? When I discovered him he was working with my plumber as an apprentice. I fear it's my doing that he has no peace these days. Damn celebrity. Let me make it up to him by arranging a meeting with you."

Kayla wanted to see the big dark-eyed man again. "Tell him I'll be at the greenhouse conservatory down town tomorrow evening." She supposed she wanted to test his resolve by making him come to her, in her world.

"Perfect. A public place so you can be assured of safety. Clever."

"Mmm. I'm not sure I'll ever be safe with Daniel, Mr. Woolsey."

"There is safety and then a different safety. Sometimes we don't need to be that safe. Have faith, dear."

"I'll try."

He reached for his pocket. "While you're there, can I trouble you to buy an orchid plant for me? I think I'm ready to try one."

"Of course, you're more than ready." She laughed.

* * * *

As she rushed to the conservatory, Kayla promised herself she'd wait a half hour, maybe an hour. Two tops. Oh, God, no way would he show up. As she drew nearer she saw a huge crowd of women gathered at the entrance laughing, pushing, talking.

In the midst of it all, standing taller than all the other heads was a dark eyed man.

Daniel.

He was here.

And what had she done to him? She gasped and put a hand to her mouth. *Thoughtlessly she'd asked him to meet her in a very public place.*

The hoards of fans were closing in on him, soon to smother him alive. She ran. Rushing forward into the fray like a charging avenging angel.

"For God's sake, give the man some air. Shoo. Move away!"

Still signing autographs, Daniel smiled at her and held out a hand. "My date has arrived at last, ladies."

After saying goodbyes, he took her elbow and ushered her into the conservatory atrium. There was no one else in the place. "What?"

He scratched his head as if uncertain and wondering how she'd take the answer. "I made a sizable donation to the park for an hour alone."

"Oh, wow, I had no idea they might do that."

"Neither did they. Come here. I've missed you my little intruder."

"Hey, I had ever legal right to be in that hotel room."

"I know that now."

And they walked and talked hardly noticing the beautiful greenery that covered the ground, hung from and reached toward the glass ceiling.

* * * *

Six months later, Daniel Brand watched as his new wife walked into the university's football stadium on graduation day.

"There's our Kayla, Dan," her father said, slapping him on the shoulder. Daniel still marveled at how well he was accepted by her college professor parents and into the world of academia in general. Few stared or asked rude questions here. He'd given more than one guest lecture in the theatre department. Everyone knew who he was, yet kept a curious but polite distance. He felt at home here.

As he watched Kayla, the sun highlighted her red hair, making it fire with gold sparks, reminding him of their honeymoon in Hawaii, her body, skin-to-skin with his on the sandy beach. She'd more than made all his dreams come true. Some he'd not even known he had. Given him happiness he'd not dared to hope for.

Her mom spoke, "I'm so glad our Kayla got that assistant professorship appointment at Cornell. I was worried you two would move too far away from home. Maybe to Hollywood."

"Yes. Everything is perfect," his father-in-law agreed.

"Perfect." Too soon to tell them, they expected their first baby in eight months. Not long before they'd be ready to share the news with their friends and family. He smiled wider.

With Kayla's encouragement, Daniel had written a play. The darn thing was having a good run off-Broadway.

Life was good with his plant lady.

Then the happy ever after.