
THE HARD HITTER

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The Hard Hitter
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As I drive through the busy Friday afternoon traffic, I glance in the rearview mirror and grimace when I catch my sweet daughter Daisy's reflection. I love my daughter more than life, but if she keeps singing that damn alligator song and chomping her hands together, my brain is going to explode into a million tiny pieces. Have you ever seen that scene from *Pulp Fiction* where John Travolta's character Vincent accidentally shoots Lamarr in the backseat of the car? Brains everywhere. Yeah, any second now, and we're pretty much going to have a reenactment of that.

Okay, okay, I get it. The alligator song is about teaching kids pattern recognition, and it's great for auditory skills and expressive language. That's all well and fine. But what is it teaching us parents? Oh, my guess would be how to find the bottom of a scotch bottle sooner rather than later.

"Hey Daisy," I say, and she puts her toy iPad down and blinks up at me. "Did you have fun at daycare today?"

Her head bobs emphatically, and my heart beats a little harder in my chest as her dark lashes blink rapidly over big blue eyes. How her mother could have just dropped her tiny

four-month-old baby on my buddy Jonah's doorstep a few years ago is beyond me. What kind of woman uses a child to trap a guy? As if that wasn't bad enough, Daisy wasn't even Jonah's child to begin with.

No, she was mine. We found that out later when her secret plan to marry Jonah backfired on her. Now she's nowhere to be found, and I have full custody of my little girl.

Nevertheless, back when it happened, Jonah stepped up to be the man the little girl needed. In the end, he had a hard time handing Daisy over to me when the truth came out, but that doesn't mean he's not a part of her life anymore. Not only is he my best friend, he married my sister Quinn, and now he's Uncle Jonah to Daisy.

"Daddy," she says, and reaches for her doll. "I want to play with Scotty."

Tb-snotty.

I chuckle at that, even though I shouldn't. Daisy has a hard time with her s's, which is why we're currently on our way to Andover to see the speech pathologist my sister Quinn recommended. I also shouldn't laugh because she's calling her one-year-old cousin 'snotty.' Although with the allergies he's been suffering from lately, that's not too far off from the truth.

I glance at my GPS, and turn right as I enter an older suburb of Andover, a good forty-minute drive from our home in Cambridge. I slow down as kids run up and down the sidewalk, some kicking a ball, others using chalk on the driveways. I glance at the house numbers and when I find the one I'm looking for, I slow down and pull up to the curb.

"We can't play with Scotty today, because we're going to see that nice lady Samantha. Remember I told you about her?"

"But I want to play with Scotty."

"You played with him all morning, honey, and will see him

again tomorrow.” My sister Quinn owns her own daycare, and while I’d like to keep Daisy with me during the daytime, next year she starts kindergarten, and I know the interaction is good for her. Playing for the Seattle Shooters means being on the road during hockey season. I don’t like to give up any time with Daisy during my summer breaks, but I need to do what’s best for my child.

I turn the car off and climb from the driver’s seat. Daisy is already unbuckling herself by the time I open her door. I love her fierce independence. Truly, I do. But God help me when she becomes a teen.

Abandoning her toys, she slides her tiny palm into mine, and I help her from her car seat. I honestly have no idea how this session is going to go, or what I’m supposed to do or expect, but Samantha was recommended by Quinn, so I’m willing to make the long commute and put my child’s care in her hands.

“All set?” I ask, and hit the fob to lock the car.

I slow my steps to match hers as we make our way up the cracked and pitted walkway. It’s an older home, as many of them are in this suburb. I pull Daisy close so she doesn’t brush up against the car in the small driveway.

Daisy clings to my leg, and while she’s not normally nervous around strangers, I sense her worry. I explained this whole meeting to her, but she’s too young to really understand. I pick her up and she cups my cheeks with her hands.

“Daddy, you look like Andi,” she says, and she squeezes my cheeks together and laughs. Andi is her goldfish, and no way do we look alike.

“Oh, is that right?” I ask, and tickle her sides as I make goldfish lips and move my mouth, not the most attractive look, I know. I play with her like that for a minute, until a voice interrupts us.

“Hi.”

Lips still puckered, I go perfectly still—and shift my gaze to see the hottest woman on the planet, holding her door open and trying to bite back a grin.

Sbit.

I stop puckering, and she extends her hand to me. “You must be Zander.”

“I am,” I say and slide my hand into hers, taking note of her softness, the light, sweet vanilla scent of her skin. It reminds me of the icing we used on the cupcakes last night.

She turns her attention to Daisy. “And you must be Daisy,” she says, and produces an alligator puppet from behind her back.

Daisy giggles and reaches for the alligator. “Chomp. Chomp,” she squeals.

“I...uh...” I begin. “I take it you’re Samantha?”

“I am. You can call me Sam,” she says, as I stand there like an idiot and try to think of something intelligent to say.

This gorgeous woman is Sam, the speech pathologist? When Quinn gave me her name and set up the appointment for us, I never for one second thought Sam would be young and beautiful. The vision in my mind was one of an older lady, grey hair, tall and slender, a strict disciplinarian with kids. But holy hell, this is no Nanny McPhee. Quite the opposite actually.

As she uses her puppet to nibble on Daisy’s toes, I take that moment to look her over. Yeah, okay, I know, I know. I should not be ogling my daughter’s speech pathologist. It’s been a long time since I’ve been with a woman, and this one—with her long dark hair piled high in a ponytail, her fresh girl-next-door looks, and curves to die for—quickly remind me of that. It’s not that I’ve been off women. I just had other, more important matters at hand. Like taking care of Daisy, being careful who I bring into her life, and playing hard for the Shooters.

Oh shit, she's saying something to me.

I scratch my chin. "Ah, what was that?"

"Come on in," she says and steps back to give us room to enter.

I step inside and set Daisy down. When I turn back I note the way Sam is struggling to get her screen door shut. "Need a hand?"

"I got it. I just have to give it a good hard tug. I think it's the hinges. I haven't had a chance to fix them yet."

She fixes her own hinges?

Does that mean she doesn't have a man in her life? Not that a woman needs a man to do her handiwork, and I'm sure she's quite capable herself...but dammit, I'd love to get my hands on her hinges, slide them right into place for her.

She gets the door closed and turns to us. A smile lights up her face as she zeroes in on Daisy, and I already feel the connection between the two. She's obviously great with kids. She holds her hand out to my daughter.

"Daisy, would you like to see my playroom?"

Daisy nods her head but sticks close to me. I give her a nudge to let her know it's okay, and she takes Sam's hand. Two ponytails bounce as I follow behind, and I go quiet as Sam engages my daughter in conversation, no doubt to gauge her lisp. I glance into the living room as we pass and take in her bookshelf, small TV, and soft leather sofa and chair. The place is small compared to mine, but homey, and I like that.

My own place is too large for just Daisy and me. Quinn insists I fill it with more kids, and I insists she's crazy. Truthfully, I'm not about to bring anyone into my life who could possibly hurt Daisy. We've both had enough people run out on us.

Yeah, it's clear I'm jaded where women are concerned.

But can you blame me? My own mom left when Quinn and I were little and much of the responsibly of raising my

younger sister landed on me—not that I’m complaining. Toss in a puck bunny who used Daisy to snag herself a hockey player, and then gave up custody when her plan backfired. On top of that, my girlfriend left me when she discovered Daisy was mine. She wasn’t prepared for a ready-made family, and just up and left without so much as a backward glance.

Yeah, I’m a cynic when it comes to long term. No one ever sticks around. But sex and relationships are two different beasts, and this woman is reminding me it’s been too long since I breathed in sweet-smelling skin, found myself between a soft pair of thighs.

We go down the hall and step into a room, likely a former bedroom, that has been converted to an office.

“Why don’t you go check out the toys,” she says to Daisy. Daisy bounces off, and Sam straightens. She has a soft pink flush on her face when she turns back to me. “Excuse the mess.”

“Looks perfectly good to me,” I say as I catalogue the room.

“It’s probably not what you expected.” She waves her hand. “But I’m hoping to break that wall down and put a door in the...the...” She pauses for a second, like she’s trying to gather herself, then says, “I would like for the office to have direct access to the outside, so clients won’t have to go through my home.”

“Have you been here long?” I ask.

“No, just a couple months, and just getting set up. I really appreciate Quinn sending work my way.”

Daisy squeals when she finds some orange stuffed bear, and Sam gestures to a chair. “Please have a seat so we can get the consultation underway, then if it’s okay with you, I’ll ask you to have a seat in the living room, so I can have one-on-one time with Daisy.” She opens a file, and slides a paper

across the desk. I glance it over, fill in my information, including my insurance, and lift my head to slide it back.

When I do, I find Sam watching me. Her eyes go wide and she tears her gaze away fast, then goes about fussing with the papers.

"I...uh...okay." She closes the file, takes another breath like she's trying to center herself again, and says, "Everything looks in order."

"Do you think you can help her?" I ask.

A warm smile comes over her face as she turns her focus to Daisy. "I'll do my best." She stands and I follow her up. "We'll take it slow. Best not to rush things or put too much pressure on her." Her big brown eyes narrow. "Have you been working with her at home, trying to get her to enunciate properly?"

I reach behind me and rub the back of my neck. "Uh, not really. Should I have been doing that?" I ask. Dammit, I guess I'm not about to win any father of the year awards here.

As if sensing my unease, Sam puts her hand on my arm. "Oh, no. Not at all. There will be exercises later, but right now it's best not to put pressure on her."

"Whew," I say and exhale loudly. That brings a smile to her face. I lower my voice. "I just don't want to screw up with her, you know?" I gaze at my daughter as she talks to the stuffed orange bear. "It's just her and me, and I don't always know if I'm making the right choices."

"I understand," Sam says quietly, and I shake my head.

Why am I telling her this? Then again, I'm guessing if she's a friend of Quinn's, she's well-versed in the situation that made me a single dad. I'm about to leave the room, take a seat in her living room, when her voice stops me.

"You're not what I expected," she blurts out, then her eyes go wide again, like she said something she shouldn't have.

“What did you expect?” I ask.

“I...I...” She laughs, but it’s strained and uneasy. “I’m sorry, Zander. I shouldn’t have said that. That wasn’t professional.”

I put my hands into my pockets and her gaze drops for a brief second as my jeans sink lower on my hips. “For the record, you’re not what I expected, either.”

“What did *you* expect?” she asked, her eyes flying back to mine.

“Nanny McPhee,” I say, and her mouth drops open.

“Are you serious?” I nod. “Why?” she asks.

“Beats me,” I say, as my thoughts stray, turn to the bedroom, and all the things I’d like to do with her beneath the sheets.

Okay, dude. Cool it. You are not, under any circumstance, going to have your way with your daughter’s speech pathologist, no matter how hot she is.

“Well, I’m sorry to disappoint you,” she says quietly, in a very non-flirtatious manner that makes me want to play with her, tease her a little.

“I never said I was disappointed,” I return, my voice lower, deeper.

Stop flirting already.

She draws her bottom lip between her teeth as the color on her cheeks deepen. She points to the door. “There are some magazines on the coffee table to help you pass the time.”

I reach for the door, needing the distraction. “Thanks.”

She bites back a grin. “I was going to suggest you practice your goldfish lips, but you’ve already nailed that.

Nailed that.

I laugh at her joke, but deep between my legs, my cock is jumping at her choice of words. Damned if I don’t want to show the hot speech pathologist how good I am with my words, too.

Holy mother of all that is hot. I had no idea my friend's brother was such a hottie. I only knew the hockey player they call the 'Hard Hitter' by reputation. Unlike my hockey-obsessed father, I don't follow the game and was ill prepared to come face to face with that panty-melting smile of his. I shouldn't have blurted out that he wasn't what I expected—sometimes my mouth works faster than my brain, which has gotten me in trouble in the past.

Truthfully, I expected an egomaniac, a guy who strutted around like he was the cock of the walk. What I found instead was a guy who cared about his daughter's well-being. A guy whose words made my thoughts go in a direction I didn't want then to go. I'm off men for a while, maybe even forever. A relationship is not in my near future, considering how many of them I've screwed up in the past. Now I'm all work and no play, my business my main concern.

How's that working out for you, Sam?

Not great, judging by the way my body reacted when faced with six feet of pure testosterone. A hot, dominant

male with calloused hands that have undoubtedly brought a lot of pleasure.

I take a deep, steady breath and pull myself together as my office door closes with a soft click. Even though he's gone, his scent—that of freshly showered skin—and his presence still dominate the small space. Working to clear my thoughts and get my much-neglected body under control, I turn my attention to sweet little Daisy as she happily babbles with the bear. Zander might be the hottest guy I've ever seen, but I'm not about to spend this session thinking about him.

But later...when I'm tucked into bed. Oh, how I'll imagine all the dirty things he says between the sheets, all the filthy things he'll demand of me.

Stop it, Sam!

Good God. I'm a professional, and getting involved with a client's parent is anything but smart. Not that I think I'm his type or anything. He probably dates perfect women. Perfect hair, perfect bodies, perfect speech...perfectly proper.

While I might come across as that nice girl, deep down I have cravings...needs. Not that I'd ever express them. Not ever again, anyway. It was less than a year ago, after I'd blurted out in bed that I wanted it a bit rough, that my fiancé went ballistic. He made me feel small, embarrassed, saying there was something wrong with me. Nice girls like me shouldn't want such filth. He was disgusted with me, and when I tried to explain, my damn stutter came back, making me feel twice as foolish.

He'd looked at me with disdain, his lips twisted in derision. I'll never forget the way he made me feel. Never want to feel that way again. After he dumped me, broke off the engagement, I locked up my longings, buried my cravings, and put my focus into my business.

Truthfully, when it comes to relationships, I have a penchant for ruining them. Before my fiancé, I once blurted

out that I loved the guy I'd been seeing. That sent him running. And before him, the guy I'd been dating said I didn't pay him enough attention. I'd been studying too much, apparently, and failed to create work/life/balance.

Yeah, I'm a screw up.

Now, relationships are not on my agenda. Since I can't quite figure out the whole balance thing, my entire focus is on work—growing my business so I can pay down my student loans and still make my mortgage payments.

“Daisy, I see you found Mr. Giggles.”

“Mr. Giggles,” she says her ‘s’ coming out at a ‘th’.

I drop down onto the floor next to her and for the next half hour, spend some time getting to know her. From the other room, I hear my front door open, the screen door clanging shut. I'm guessing Daisy's father must have gotten bored with the magazines and decided to get a breath of fresh air. Not that I can blame him. It's a beautiful day. I spend the rest of our time practicing a few more enunciation games with Daisy, then climb to my feet.

“Want to go see what Daddy's up to?” I ask her.

She gives me a smile and nods her head. “Daddy said he would get me an ice cream later.”

I check my watch. It's late afternoon, and Daisy was my last client of the day. “Well aren't you a lucky girl.” I open the door to the office. “What's your favorite kind of ice cream?”

“Chocolate.”

A girl after my own heart. “Me too,” I say and lead her down the hall.

But when I spot Zander at my front door, screwdriver in his hand and fixing my hinges, I stop dead in my tracks.

“What...what are you doing?” I ask.

He glances at me over his shoulder, his eyes lingering a moment too long, then he grins and says, “Fixing your door. I hope you don't mind?”

"You didn't have to do that."

"What can I say, I was bored. When I'm bored, I like to put my hands to use."

Before I can help myself, my gaze drops to his hands—big, calloused hands—and my thoughts race, thinking about other ways he might put those hands to use...on my body. Roughly.

Oh, God...

"Daddy, the big bear is named Mr. Giggles," Daisy says and chuckles.

"Is that right?" Zander asks, and holds his arms out for his daughter. She darts toward him, and he scoops her up. "Did you have fun?" She nods her head, and her ponytail bounces around her tiny shoulders.

Zander looks at me, his eyes holding so many questions.

"She did just fine," I say. I step closer and tap Daisy on the nose. But when I do, tension arcs between Zander and me.

Holy! Never in my life have I felt such electricity, such deep desire stirring in my body. This kind of thing never happens to me. Nevertheless, I'd be smart to ignore it. I can't let anything distract me from my business. Not when I'm in the danger zone. All my focus and energy must go into my career, getting it in the black so I can start paying things down.

"I guess I should book another appointment."

"Same time next week?" I ask. Then again, maybe he has better things to do on a late Friday afternoon. Like get ready for a hot date or something. "Unless you have plans," I say.

He thinks about it for a second, then nods. "No plans. That will work."

"We're getting ice cream," Daisy says.

"That's right. Those are our big plans for the night."

"Sam likes chocolate too. Daddy likes vanilla, but I don't."

"Vanilla is good," he says, his nostrils flaring, like he can smell the body wash I showered with earlier.

“Can Sam come with us?”

Zander’s gaze shoots to mine. “Uh...”

“Thanks for asking, Daisy. But I’m not able to come,” I say. “I have plans.” Not really a lie. I have a meal that needs to go in the microwave and a date with Netflix.

Zander gives a curt nod. “We’ll get out of your way then.”

He’s about to leave but stops when I say, “Thank you for fixing my door. I really appreciate it. Can I pay you for it?”

His eyes narrow, like he’s surprised by that. “It was nothing. But maybe...”

“Maybe what?”

He scrubs his chin, looks at his daughter as she cups his cheeks, and then shakes his head, as if to get it on right. Is he changing his mind about what he was going to say? He winks at me. “Maybe a cup of coffee or something next time I’m by.”

My cheeks heat, mortified. My God, my mother would kill me for my bad manners. I always offer a beverage to the parents. But this time I was so thrown off by his good looks and charm—the way he dominated my space—my manners packed a bag and headed south...meeting up with my suddenly overactive libido.

“I’m...I’m so sorry,” I say. *Don’t stutter Sam.* “Excuse my bad manners.”

His smile falls. “No, no. It’s okay. I was just kidding. I had a coffee in the car on the way here.”

Okay, so if he was teasing about the coffee, what was he really going to say?

Oh, maybe you can make it up to me with a hot, dirty roll in the sack, where I hold you down hard and give it to you even harder.

My entire body buzzes to life.

“Ice cream, Daddy,” Daisy sings out, breaking the tension. Zander smiles at his daughter.

“Ice cream it is.” He gives me a nod and walks through the

door. The screen glides shut behind him, and I open it and close it again, checking out his handiwork. He's a hockey player, good with a stick, but I guess I never took him for a handyman, too. From what Quinn told me, after their mother walked out on them when they were young, their father worked long hours as a mail carrier and wasn't there much for the family. A lot of the responsibility fell on Zander.

As my thoughts go to Quinn, I grab my cell from my back pocket and send her a text.

Zander and Daisy just left.

Three dots repeat as she texts back.

How did it go?

Great, Daisy is a sweetie.

I stare at the phone as she texts back, debating my next words.

She really is. Zander is doing a great job with her.

Speaking of Zander...

Your brother is nice.

I leave out the hotter-than-hell part. Best not to give Quinn any ideas. I haven't known her that long—we met a couple years back, after she started her own daycare and was searching for a speech pathologist—but she's always trying to set me up. I had just graduated when she first reached out to me, working at a clinic to gain experience. We hit it off, but she's always at me—you need to date, Sam. You need to get out more.

She's not wrong.

He fixed my door.

That was nice of him.

Like I said, he's nice. I'd like to repay him. Any ideas how?

Three little dots pop up again, and I fully expect her to come back with something inappropriate. Then again, maybe not. This is, after all, her big brother.

He likes pie.

I stare at that for a moment and wonder what she's getting at. *Pie?* I text back. Where the hell is she going with this?

Yeah, homemade. Especially cherry.

Are you suggesting I make him a cherry pie?

And deliver it to him. He's home with Daisy tonight. I'll send you his address.

I ignore the odd little thrill that he's not on some hot date.

Don't you think that's a bit much?

No.

His address comes through, and I do a double take. He's in one hell of a posh area of Cambridge. Then again, it shouldn't surprise me. He's a hockey player worth millions. I can't imagine what he thought of my rundown little place, or what he'd think of the small house I'd grown up in. It wasn't much, but I had the love and support of my mother and father.

Gotta run, Scotty is crying.

I slide my finger across the phone and end the call. Turning, I stare down the hall and into my kitchen.

Wait, I'm not really considering Quinn's suggestion, am I? How weird would it be to find myself on Zander's doorstep with a cherry pie in hand—a homemade cherry pie. I do make a mean one, having spent a lot of time in the kitchen baking with Mom when I was young.

The man fixed my door. A cherry pie to thank him is overkill, and he'd probably think I was crazy. Okay, enough of that. I am not going to bake him a pie and deliver it. No way. No how.

I don't think.