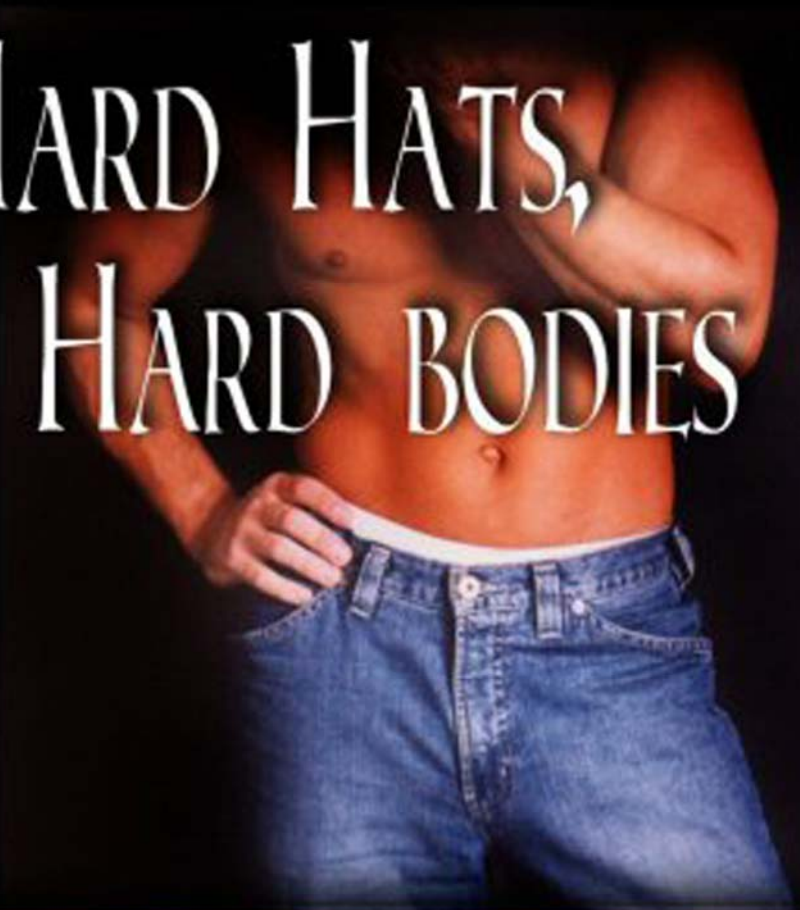


VENUS PRESS



HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

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HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

BY

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www.VenusPress.com

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Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

DEMOLISHING MR. PERFECT

BY

CYNDI REDDING

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

Dedication:

To my wonderful husband and his sexy toolbelt. He came home dirty and gritty
every night after work when we were first married...
and I still couldn't keep my hands off of him!

Thanks very much to Susan Wise, who shared with me some funny stories about
her “Mr. Perfect.” I found them so inspiring, I got her permission to use one in my book!

Chapter One

Natalie Watson wandered into the sperm bank like a zombie. When Liz, her coworker, offered a perky greeting, she ignored her, went straight to the break room and slumped into a chair. Dropping her Prada bag on the floor with a thump, she rested her head on the table. She was tempted to pound it a few times, but she could hear Liz scurrying in behind her. Sometimes Natalie was glad she wore her heart on her sleeve and people could pick up her non-verbal cues, but this wasn't one of them.

Liz sighed. "You got stood up, again?"

Natalie picked her head up off the table. Her long brunette hair hung over her face. "Morning, Liz. How did you know? Do you have psychic powers or something?"

"I don't need psychic powers. I just know what it means when you're slumped over the table in the break room." Liz, the clinic's ditzy blond LPN, poured two cups of coffee, and sat beside her.

"Yep, I got stood up. Again!" Tossing her elbow-length hair over her shoulder, Natalie tried to suppress the urge to scream—not at Liz, just at life in general. "You know, I wish you *were* psychic. Then maybe you could tell me who's actually going to show up for dates."

"Which perfect guy did it this time?"

"Donor Code 7945."

"Cut it out. You're the only one who memorizes their codes, and you probably shouldn't. So, was it the gorgeous Harvard student or the MIT assistant Professor with the cute butt?"

"Neither. They were last weekend and the weekend before. It was the intern from Children's Hospital."

"Oh no. If you can't trust a pediatrician, who can you trust?"

In answer to her co-worker's rhetorical question, Natalie shrugged and heaved a sigh.

"Why do you keep looking for guys in this place? There may be a reason they empty their sperm into donor cups instead of women, you know."

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

Natalie chuckled despite her disappointment. “I want the caliber of men I meet here. These are the best and brightest Boston has to offer. “

“Yeah, we get the cream of the crop all right.” Liz elbowed her, but Natalie just rolled her eyes.

“Maybe right now they need a little extra money for student loans, but someday, most of these guys will be rich and famous.”

“And able to impress your snotty family.”

“Hey! Don’t talk about my family that way. We all blow our noses. I think the word you were looking for was ‘snooty.’”

Liz patted her shoulder. “The point is, who cares what your family wants for you. What do you want?”

Natalie propped her chin on her cupped hand. “I want a nice, intelligent guy who doesn’t leave me all dressed up with nowhere to go. These guys could be perfect. They’re incredibly bright and taking the time to do something wonderful for childless couples. I hope that someday I’ll have a child, and with one of them. Who knows? I might give birth to a future president.”

“We always assume they’re being altruistic, but maybe they’re not. Maybe they’re being utterly egotistical. Some of them might like knowing that somewhere out there, little mini-thems are running around, becoming child prodigies, without their having the responsibility of raising kids.”

“I don’t believe that. These guys are too busy to raise kids, and, apparently, too busy to show up for dates. Half of them are on-call and get paged—or something.”

“Well, let’s not forget that some of them are making four hundred dollars a month here. If they take you out, they might have to spend a week’s pay. You believe whatever you want, but I’m getting tired of seeing those beautiful blue eyes of yours all red and puffy in the morning.”

“Well, so am I.” Natalie looked over at her friend and frowned. Liz had her pity face on.

“Why don’t you change your policy of one ‘strike and you’re out’? At least give the cute ones a second chance.”

“Nope. They know my policy. I hate being stood up. If they miss a date without a phone call, we’re done. Come on, letting me down easy is the least they can do.”

“Yet, they keep forgetting all about you! Look, Natalie, maybe these guys just aren’t your type, no matter what you want to believe. I’ll bet half of them don’t know what a vacation is.”

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

“My father was a brilliant surgeon, *and* devoted to his family. I know there’s another guy like that out there somewhere. He may be sitting in the waiting room right now.”

“When is Donor what’s-his-number coming in next?”

Natalie pursed her lips. “Monday.”

“I’ll bet he’ll have some handy-dandy excuse all ready. Watch his eyes as he’s telling you why he didn’t call.”

“I know. Down and to one side means he’s lying. He didn’t have to respond to an emergency and he didn’t lose my number.” Natalie pushed her chair out, stood and grabbed her coffee. “Well, we’d better get out there. The morning rush is about to begin.”

Shane Derby called over his shoulder to his men. “Clear!” He pushed the plunger and stepped back as the charges detonated. The decaying, four-story building imploded and came crashing down in a pile of concrete, wood, marble, and dust. His men, many of whom were college boys working through the summer, cheered. The building had collapsed in on itself and had barely littered the street. A perfect demolition.

One of them yelled over to him. He removed his earplugs and cupped a hand behind his ear.

“Oh, sorry. I said nice job, Boss.”

“Yeah, that was a thing of beauty.”

He studied the site and pointed to a corner that hadn’t quite come down. “We’ll need to take the wrecking ball to that,” he called over to his assistants. “And we’ll need to take down the abutting wall of the building next-door brick by brick. I estimated about a week for the job, and I think that’s right on target.”

Movement out of the corner of his eye caught Shane’s attention. A cute, lithe figure, wearing a nurse’s uniform bounded down the stairs of the building next-door two at a time. Her long, shiny, dark hair fluttered in the breeze. She made purposeful strides right toward him. As she approached, he could see her cute face, but her jaw was set and her blue eyes were blazing.

“Are you in charge here?” she shouted upon reaching him.

“Shane Derby at your service, miss, but call me Crusher. What can I do for you?”

“You can start by telling me why you didn’t notify the area businesses that you’d be blasting today.”

“Not my job, Miss... Miss? I didn’t catch your name.”

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

“Never mind my name. And what kind of irresponsible attitude is that? ‘Not my job’.” She stood with her feet apart, arms folded, and as immobile as a brick wall. For a small girl, she had ample breasts that jutted over her arms and separated in two nicely delineated peaks.

Shane wasn’t used to women yelling at him about his attitude or anything else. “Look, Miss never-mind-my-name, the building owner should have done that, *if* he thought you needed to know. Maybe he thought it didn’t matter. I was just hired to blow it up, and I do what I’m paid for.”

“How arrogant. Of course we needed to know!” She took one step closer. “You just cost us some valuable samples.”

This beautiful spitfire barely came up to his shoulder, but there she stood on the sidewalk, almost toe-to-toe with him, leaning toward him with hands on her hips. It would have been a menacing pose if she were bigger. Despite her anger, Shane felt an attraction to her full lips, cute freckled nose and intense blue eyes, as well as the passion and purpose this woman seemed to have. She was so unlike the empty-headed bimbetts he’d been meeting for the past few months. His masculinity stirred in his jeans. “What kind of samples?”

“I work at the sperm bank next door. They were donor samples. Thanks to your fireworks, two of my donors missed their cups and a third is so traumatized, he won’t get another erection for a month!”

Was she joking? Could someone be putting her up to this? Her demeanor said she was dead serious. Shane reared back and an explosion of laughter erupted from deep in his diaphragm.

Her eyes widened and she glared at him. “You think this is funny? Some childless couple may have been counting on a donation from one of those men, and you think it’s a laughable situation?”

Shane pulled himself together and took a deep breath before he responded. “No, darlin’, but don’t worry. Me and the boys will come over after we’re through here and leave you a present.”

The nurse clenched her fists and bristled. “How dare you! Do you think you could possibly measure up to our standards? We require college graduates or at the very least four-year college students with some sort of promising talent. You and your rag-tag team would be turned down flat.” She whirled on her heel and stomped off toward her four-story brick building.

Shane’s amusement turned to disbelief. Arms folded, he called after her, “Perhaps I should have over-calculated and set off that detonation just a little to the left.”

Chapter Two

“I should never have let you talk me into this,” Natalie protested.

Liz tugged her arm and dragged her friend toward the small doorway between two decrepit buildings downtown. Iron bars covered the dirty glass front door. “Too bad. The more I thought about your idea of seeing a psychic the better I liked it.”

Natalie waved her only free arm in the air. “But I don’t believe in this stuff. I was raised in a very scientific, intellectual family. There’s no way someone can look into my teacup and tell me anything other than what kind of tea I’m drinking.”

Liz pushed the doorbell and when the answering buzzer sounded, she opened the door. “Well, maybe, with an open mind, you’ll learn something interesting.” She shoved Natalie in ahead of her. “Don’t be a wimp.”

Natalie whipped around and glared at her friend. “I’m no wimp.”

“Then prove it.”

Natalie rolled her eyes and started up the stairs. She stopped halfway. “Who’s paying for this brainless waste of a lunch hour?”

“We’re going Dutch. You’ll pay for your reading, and I’ll pay for mine.”

Natalie shot back with an amused smile. “Oh, so you’re letting them peek under your skirts too?”

Liz shrugged. “Or whatever...”

When they reached the top of the stairs Natalie froze. Liz reached around her and turned the discolored brass doorknob, then she gave her a push.

Natalie stumbled into the sparsely decorated room, causing a half dozen pair of eyes to turn her way. She squared her shoulders when a brightly dressed, hunched woman with orange lips toddled toward them. Wide floorboards squeaked.

Natalie glanced around taking in the surroundings. Huge filthy windows lined one wall. Peeling wallpaper from another decade lined the other. What appeared to be a kitchenette from the forties stood at the farthest end.

“Are you here for a reading?” The old woman asked.

“Yes,” Liz answered. “A tea-reading and lunch. We have an appointment.”

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

The old woman nodded. She led them between two tables where other patrons were having their futures foretold and escorted them to an empty table toward the kitchen. After they were seated the woman proceeded to the kitchen where she took two delicate bone-china teacups off a shelf.

"I always get the table next to the kitchen," Natalie whispered.

"That's because you're always alone."

"Be quiet, she'll hear you. I don't want to give her any hints."

Liz glanced at the woman, then back to Natalie. "She couldn't have heard that blast this morning. She must be eighty."

"Listen Liz, I was having second thoughts before, but now I'm just plain unnerved. This place is eerie."

"Hush."

The old woman shuffled toward them carrying a tray. She set it on the edge of the table and placed a cup of tea in front of each of them.

"Do you have any milk?" Natalie asked.

The woman's eyes opened in shock. "Milk? My goodness, no. That would ruin the reading. Sugar is on the table." She placed two plates with watercress finger sandwiches to the side of their teacups. Clearly, tea was the main dish.

Natalie looked in the cup and wrinkled her nose as the woman walked back to the kitchen. "It's full of loose tea. They didn't even strain it."

Liz laughed. "Of course not. This isn't London at four in the afternoon. We're having our tealeaves read. Wouldn't you assume there would be tealeaves involved?"

Natalie sighed and lifted her cup. She blew on the hot liquid and sipped daintily.

The woman made her way back toward their table, saying. "I'm Zelda. Think of a question you want answered and concentrate on that while you drink your tea." She continued across the bare floor toward the door where they had entered. "I'll be back when you're finished."

"Thank you," Liz called.

Natalie murmured, "Zelda. A name like that is usually followed by, *the amazing contortionist or tightrope walker.*"

"Look, she could be Zelda, the Great. Stop being sarcastic and drink your tea."

Zelda returned to them a few minutes later and sat in the chair between them. Natalie was straining the liquid through her nearly closed lips, so she was still working on her cup of tea while Liz had her tealeaves read.

Liz wore an engagement ring with a diamond the size of their teacups, so Natalie wasn't impressed when Zelda told her about her fiancé and their future children. Some

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

of the stuff was fairly specific, but a lucky guess or two wasn't going to convince Natalie to modify her beliefs. And as for the future? Well, how would anyone know enough to say--*You're wrong. I'm not going to adopt a baby from China?*

At last it was Natalie's turn. The woman made a couple of lucky guesses for her right off the bat. She guessed she was single and looking for Mr. Right. Not nearly enough to knock her socks off, although she could be gay and looking for Ms. Right she supposed.

Liz dug in her pocketbook and produced a pen. She took notes on her napkin about Natalie's reading. Maybe so she could wave it in her face if any of it came true.

Zelda turned the cup over and dumped the liquid, leaving the tealeaves clinging to the sides. "He's nearby. You'll get to know him soon. He's intelligent, but works with his hands as well as his brain."

Natalie looked at Liz and shrugged.

"His coloring is fair and he likes to laugh. Don't make the mistake of underestimating him. He's not perfect, but if you're open, you'll see he's the perfect man for you."

"What's wrong with him?" Natalie asked.

Zelda looked up from the cup and studied Natalie's face. "You two could have quite a problem if you treat him with disrespect or prejudice."

"Why would I do that? I treat all of our clients with respect."

"Maybe he's not a client," Liz interjected. She looked to Zelda as if she had a video rolling in the bottom of the teacup and asked, "Where will she meet him?"

Zelda shook her head. "I don't know. They may have met already." Turning her gaze back to Natalie she said, "Give him a chance. He'll surprise you."

"What kind of cryptic nonsense was that?" Natalie complained as she and Liz walked back to work after their reading.

"What's the matter? I thought you'd love what she had to say."

"But it was so general."

"No it wasn't." Liz dug in her uniform pocket and produced the napkin on which she had jotted notes.

"He's nearby. You'll get to know him soon. He's intelligent, but works with his hands. His coloring is fair and he likes to laugh. Don't make the mistake of underestimating him. He's not perfect, but he's the perfect man for you."

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

“Don’t you get it? That could fit any eccentric artist or scruffy sculptor, but that’s not the kind of guy I’m interested in. I want someone who works with his mind, not his hands.”

“There’s that prejudice she was talking about.” Liz elbowed her, raised her eyebrows and smiled wickedly. “I wouldn’t underestimate a man with talented hands, if you know what I mean.”

Natalie rolled her eyes, but smiled. “Okay, I get your drift. Hey, maybe I’ll get lucky and meet a nice, clean, well-dressed concert pianist in the next few hours.”

“I sure hope so.” She must have caught Natalie smirking because Liz stopped and put a hand on her hip. “Hey, you were making fun of the whole thing, weren’t you?”

Natalie chuckled and resumed walking.

“Look, Natalie. You just never can tell what you least expect most.”

As they neared their workplace, Natalie shook her head at the rubble that used to be the building next door. “What a shame. That old building was beautiful in its own way.”

“I wonder what’ll be going up in its place?”

Liz strolled past their building and continued over to watch the demolition crew that were knee deep in debris. Liz called out, “Hey, do you know what’s going to be built on this lot?”

Natalie’s curiosity had her following behind.

One of the young men straightened and called, “Hey, boss,” over to a tall figure in the corner. The man approached them. Natalie could see his muscled thighs tighten underneath his jeans as he stepped over the wreckage. They could have been acid washed, or they could have just been covered with ash, but they fit like a glove. A tool belt hung from his lean hips and swung in a sensuous slow dance as he walked.

His face, with its strong, slanted jaw, was so covered in dirt that when he smiled, his teeth shone a brilliant white and his sapphire eyes twinkled. He sported light laugh lines furrowing through the dirt on either side of his eyes. He looked over at Natalie and tipped his hard hat revealing tousled blond hair. That’s when she realized, to her horror, that it was the arrogant foreman from that morning.

“Do you ladies have a question for me?” he asked with exaggerated politeness.

“Yeah. Hi, I work next door. I was wondering if you knew what was going up in place of this old building.”

“I could find out for you.” Without waiting for an answer, he said, “It’ll only take a moment.” As he spoke he pulled a cell phone from a pocket on his tool belt.

Liz turned around, grinned wickedly, and wagged her eyebrows at Natalie.

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

Natalie gave her a quick shake of her head as if to tell her, *no way in hell, and mind your own business.*

“Liam! It’s Crusher.” He winked at Natalie. “Do you have any idea what you’re putting up in place of the building I’m tearing down on Boylston?”

She couldn’t believe her gut was clenching at the sight of his smile and his dancing blue eyes. His voice was low and gravelly but in a sexy way, not like a two-pack-a-day smoker. But where did that phony nicey-nice act come from?

“Yeah? Sounds good. I have a couple of lovely young ladies here who’ll be glad to know that. Thanks Bro’.” Shane flipped the cover on his cell phone closed and dropped it back into his tool belt pocket. “Do you ladies like art?”

“Oh, I love it,” Liz exclaimed. “Is it going to be a print shop?”

“Better,” he said.

Natalie spied Donor #7945 across the street, waving and smiling like nothing was wrong. Well, he was about to find out differently. “I’m going back in, Liz.”

The office manager came out to the desk at four-thirty p.m. “Hey, Nat, we just had one more added. I know it’s the end of the day, but he’s probably finished with his paperwork by now.”

Natalie shrugged. “If I had a date, I’d be upset, but I don’t. Might as well make a little extra money in overtime. Maybe I’ll be able to afford a male escort. I’ll bet one of *them* would show up for dates.”

Liz shot her a wicked grin. “Maybe it’s Mr. Right. Ever think of that?”

“I doubt it.” Heaving a sigh, she asked, “Where is he?”

“Exam room one.” The manager shook her head and returned to her office.

Natalie attached the necessary signature papers to a clipboard, and wandered listlessly into the exam room. She shut the door behind her, glanced up, and couldn’t believe her eyes. Still dirty from his day’s work, *Mr. Shane Derby* sat before her.

“Good afternoon, Miss Watson.”

Natalie almost dropped the clipboard. When she could speak, she asked, “You had your pre-screening over the telephone?”

He smiled, showing his white teeth. “I did, and apparently I passed with flying colors.”

“*You’re* a college student or graduate?”

“Boston University. I have an MBA. I own my own business. I’m disease free, and I have excellent references.”

Natalie scratched her head. “You know you’re going to have to provide proof.”

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

His smile disappeared, and his eyes narrowed. "What makes you think I can't?"

She shrugged. "Okay, I'm sure everything will check out. I just wanted to save you the trouble if something might not. It's a rigorous screening with blood tests, a thorough physical, a background check..."

"As long as they don't find the bodies buried in the backyard, I should be fine." He laughed at his own joke.

She heaved a huge sigh. "Let's get this over with."

"You know how to make a donor feel as welcome as an ant at your picnic."

"Why are you here? Is it because of what I said this morning?"

"Partially."

"And what else?"

One side of his mouth curved up in a smile. "Well, I like a woman with spunk, and you've got spunk."

"Are you joking? You're here to hit on me?"

"Why not? I understand that you're doing the same thing with the donors. Only one thing you can count on with me is that I'll never stand you up."

Liz popped her head in. "Natalie, I'm leaving now. I'm late for a..."

"Wait just a minute, Liz!"

Liz shot a quick smile at Shane and waved. "Sorry, Nat. I gotta go. See you tomorrow." With that the traitor left her alone with someone nicknamed "Crusher" who might or might not have bodies buried in his backyard.

"I don't feel comfortable being alone with you. I think we should reschedule..."

Shane stood and walked over to her. "Don't make me use my nail gun and secure your cute, white uniform to the wall."

He pulled her up by her arms and before she knew what was happening, she learned another reason for his nickname. He crushed his lips to hers. Her anger almost choked her. Twisting in his arms, she tried to break free.

He held her securely, with one arm around her waist and his big hand cradling her head. She arched her back and he followed, supporting her body as he took her into a deep dip. The warmth of his mouth seeped into her, melting her. Her body reacted on a primal level. She reached around and clung to him. Then, to her own amazement she opened her mouth, her tongue yearning to mate with his.

His plundered her mouth, and with the force of her own passion, she met his aggressive overture, doing more than tasting him. She wanted to devour him.

Chapter Three

Natalie arrived late the next morning, but got there before the construction crew did, to her great relief. She hadn't been able to sleep well. That stupid tealeaf reading kept replaying in her head. She couldn't help wondering if...no, that was ridiculous!"

"Good morning," Liz called over her shoulder as she scurried away from the desk.

Natalie found her in the break room pouring two coffees. "I've already had mine, thanks."

Liz glanced up at her with a furrowed brow. "You look like you need another. Did you get the plate number of the truck that hit you?"

Natalie sighed. "I couldn't sleep."

"Why not? Did a certain tall, blond, manly man keep you up all night?"

"No, of course not." She accepted the mug of steaming coffee. "Well, maybe."

Liz dragged Natalie to the table and chairs and plunked her down in one. "Tell me! I want to know everything."

"There's not much to say. As soon as you left, he yanked me up to his dirty face and kissed the *hell* out of me."

"He kissed you?" Liz gasped and grinned. "Already?"

"What do you mean, 'already'? Have you two enacted some sort of evil plan behind my back?"

Liz leaned back in her chair and chuckled. "No, but if we did it would have been for your own good. He just wanted to know your name and if you were single."

Natalie folded her arms. "And, of course, you told him...turncoat."

Liz shrugged. "So what did you do after he kissed you? Just sit back down and go over the paperwork?"

"Don't change the subject."

"Who's changing it? I want to know more. How was the kiss?"

Natalie leaned forward and rested her elbows on the table. Claspings the mug in front of her, she relived the dream-like moment. "Would you believe me if I told you I felt weak and thought I was going to pass out? Of course that could have just been from the lack of oxygen."

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

“Wow, I’m impressed! Ever been kissed like that before?”

“Nope. I doubt I’ll ever be kissed like that again, either.”

Liz’s eyes widened. “Why?”

“Because I kicked him out on his keester.” Natalie leaned back and sipped her coffee as if her reaction were a normal part of her day.

“You’re kidding. He’s a donor! Besides, that man is scrumptious, or didn’t you notice?”

“It was hard to tell what he looked like under all the dirt.”

“Stop it.” Liz slapped her hands over her ears. “I refuse to hear this. I’m not going to give you a smidge of sympathy the next time you get stood up. Not one bit.”

Natalie couldn’t hold it back any longer and broke into a chuckle.

Liz frowned. “What’s so funny?”

“I didn’t throw him out. I’m seeing him tonight after he cleans up.”

Natalie never gave an “unknown quantity” her address until she had been out with the man at least once, sometimes two or three times. But, that’s why being stood up was a risk. She’d wait at the restaurant or theatre until the last possible moment, and sometimes wind up eating alone or going home without buying a ticket. Either way, she hated the humiliation, but it was better than taking foolish chances with near strangers.

As she remembered the ‘bodies in the backyard’ comment, she was glad she planned on meeting *Crusher* at a well-known pub in the Quincy Market area, *Cheers*. Of course, the TV show, *Cheers* was based on the Bull and Finch pub over on Beacon Street, but most of the tourists didn’t know that and probably didn’t care. The market carried plenty of T-shirts, hats, and memorabilia with the *Cheers* logo that they could buy while they waited for a table, and would take home as souvenirs of their vacation. So they happily came here.

If anything happened, even though nobody would know his name—hopefully there’d be plenty of people able to give a good description.

When Natalie arrived at the glass-enclosed bar, the relaxed, summer evening was melting into a beautiful sunset that would become a balmy, seventy-five degree, starry night. So far, so good. She glanced toward the entrance, expecting to observe a sea of unfamiliar faces. To her surprise, there was a face she recognized. Shane was standing by the door, waiting for *her*.

Maybe, because he didn’t blow up buildings on an emergency basis, she could expect this man to actually meet her when and where he said he would. What a treat. He

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

also didn't seem like the genius type who couldn't match his socks, or would completely forget he had a date when his mind was occupied elsewhere.

In any case, Natalie had decided to give him a chance, and she was glad. Shane looked toward her, and when his eyes met hers, he grinned. His light, laugh lines crinkled in the corners, filling in the tan where sun had frequently hit his face. He was absolutely gorgeous when tanned, and clean skin showed off his bright baby blues and white smile.

She liked what he was wearing. He certainly wasn't as casual as he was at work. He wore crisp summer weight gray slacks and a blue shirt that accented his eyes. He held a suit jacket next to his side. That surprised her.

"Hi," she said when he came over to her. "Been waiting long?"

"No, just got here." He bent down to kiss her, and to her relief, it was a sweet peck—the type that's socially acceptable in public. Thank goodness he hadn't kissed her the way she knew he could. But the night was young and she was hopeful.

"I have a table reserved for us."

"Reservations? Here? Since when does a bar take reservations?"

He laughed. "No, sweetheart. I reserved a table at Bay Towers for eight. But if you'd rather, I could cancel and we could eat here."

She might have objected to the familiarity of being called sweetheart right off the bat, but *Bay Towers*? That had to be one of the nicest restaurants in Boston. High above Boston's financial district, the view was phenomenal. As far as she was concerned, he could call her Natalie-Shmatalie if he took her there. Of course, a man who took her to Bay Towers wanted to impress her and probably wouldn't add the Shmatalie.

"No, don't do that. Bay Towers would be terrific."

He pulled a rolled-up, red-and-gray, striped tie out of his jacket pocket. "Good."

She smiled as she realized what he must have been thinking. If she didn't expect their relationship to go anywhere, she wouldn't let him spend that much money on her. Clever. Now, was she dressed for it?

He placed his hand on the small of her back and gently guided her out into the night air toward State Street.

"If I had known, I'd have worn something else. These slacks might be a little too casual."

"You look fine, but if you'd feel better, I happen to have a dress in the car."

"You what?"

"Don't worry. It's your size according to Liz, and I have the receipt if you won't accept it."

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

Liz. The busybody, co-conspirator was going to get an earful on Monday morning. “Why don’t you take a look at it before you decide?”

Was he unbelievably presumptuous, or unbelievably thoughtful? She had no idea how to react to a gesture like that. “I—um...” All she could do was stare at his innocent-looking face and wonder.

“It’s totally up to you, of course,” he was saying.

Natalie barely heard him over the questions whirling through her mind. How on earth would he know what kind of dress to pick out for her? What her taste was? Or was it his fantasy dress? Some kind of micro-mini with a plunging neckline?

In the end, she couldn’t help being morbidly curious. “Sure, I’ll at least have a look.” As they walked, she crossed her arms and stared at the pavement. “I have to admit, it’s a little unusual to have a man buy clothing for our date, but my curiosity is getting the better of me.”

He shot her a grin. “I think you’ll like it. I have good taste.”

Moments later, they were in a parking garage heading toward a white Lexus. “White? Isn’t that an impractical color with the job you do?”

He laughed and extracted his keys from his pant’s pocket. “I drive my truck to job sites, but I like to have a nice car, too. I have other hobbies besides blowing things up.”

“Well, that’s good.” She would have gone on to ask him what else he liked to do, but he opened the back door and reached for a hanger.

Out came a simple, elegant, black dress with a V neckline that didn’t plunge too far and a hemline that, if anything, was long! She touched the silky material. It was the type of thing she would have bought for herself. In fact, if she could afford it, she might just buy it from him. She certainly wouldn’t let him pay for her clothing—but something about it looked odd.

“What size is it?”

“A six. That’s what Liz said you wore.”

“Uh oh. She didn’t remember to say *petite* did she?”

Shane looked surprised. He glanced at the dress and then at her. He must have realized it wouldn’t look right, but he held it up to her anyway. “I don’t suppose you could grow into it?”

“Tonight? Not likely.”

The awkward moment was broken when he chuckled and shrugged. Did nothing bother this man? So many of the high strung guys she had dated would have been furious

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

with themselves for not noticing the difference, or worse, with Liz for giving them the wrong size. Shane hung it on its hook over the back window, and locked the door.

“Ready to go?” he asked.

“Sure. You don’t mind being seen with me, under-dressed like this?”

“I’ll ask them to seat us in the back next to the restrooms.” He shot her that winning grin, the one she was beginning to recognize as his signature look when he was teasing. Placing his hand on the small of her back, he strolled toward the garage exit seemingly as comfortable with her as he was with himself.

They had been lucky enough to sit right next to the window enjoying an unobstructed view of the city as sunset faded into darkness, and a starry sky emerged. Dinner was unhurried, but thankfully, they found enough to talk about to avoid many awkward moments.

Their waiter kept their wine glasses full, and Shane hoped that wasn’t the only reason Natalie relaxed and seemed to be enjoying her evening. He’d discovered things about her and allowed her to know personal details that he had never expected to share. He had told her he played piano. She had picked up his hands and studied his long fingers and a smile told him she might be wondering in what other areas, requiring manual dexterity, he might be adept—like the bedroom. The fact that she wasn’t afraid to touch him was certainly a good sign, and he took the opportunity to hold one of her warm, satin hands and ask a risky question.

“Natalie, would you be open to the idea of a second date, and a third, and possibly a standing every Saturday night affair?”

To his astonishment, she grinned and squeezed his hand. “I like the idea of a second date, and possibly the rest, but I’m kind of hoping that the first one’s not over yet.”

Shane offered Natalie the mints that arrived with the bill and grabbed his wallet. Would she try to pay half? Would she think he’d “expect something” in return for such an extravagant evening? He could hope. There wasn’t any convenient way of making that happen though. They both had their own cars, and she wasn’t about to follow him in hers to a make-out spot.

Natalie excused herself to go to the ladies room. He waited on tenterhooks, wondering when the other shoe was going to drop. Something must be wrong. She was being altogether too nice to him.

When she returned and settled into her chair, she smiled warmly. “Shane, this was an incredible first date. I have to admit I didn’t think it was going to go this well.”

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

"I have to say the same. What changed your mind about me?"

She looked at her lap and chuckled. "I think it was when I realized how nice I've been to most guys, and how carelessly I've been treated. And here, I've been a total bitch to you, and you've treated me like a queen."

He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms letting his satisfaction show. "The rest of my night is yours. What would you like to do after this, your majesty?"

Natalie leaned toward him and lowered her voice to almost a whisper. "Can you follow me to my place?"

Could he follow her to her place? *Shit, yeah!*

When he had finally found a spot to park, Shane strode up the hill to where Natalie was nervously waiting for him on her doorstep.

"Parking is terrible around here," he called out.

"Yes, I know. I'm sorry you had to walk all the way up here."

"Hell, I'd park in Cambridge and walk across the bridge if I had to."

He tossed her a grin and she smiled, shyly. *Don't get skittish now, Nat.*

"What street are we on?"

"Joy Street."

"Sounds promising." He winked.

As she led him inside her townhouse and up the narrow stairs, she hoped they'd find joy in the evening ahead. Even if she wasn't ready for the whole shebang, it might be fun to be plied with kisses and feel herself turn into putty again.

Just as she opened the door, her downstairs neighbor appeared at the bottom of the stairs and called up to her.

"Natalie, dear?"

Damn. "Hi, Mrs. Green. Is everything all right?"

"No, dear. The alley light is out again. You know how we worry when it gets dark back there."

"Oh, of course. I'll take care of it first thing in the morning."

"But it's at night when we need it to be lit, dear."

Natalie took a deep breath and looked at Shane as she answered the elderly woman. "I'll take care of it now, then, Mrs. Green. Thanks for letting me know about it."

Mrs. Green thanked her and shuffled back to her own apartment. Natalie opened the door wide, for Shane to enter.

He looked around.

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

“Nice place. Are you the building super?”

She chuckled. “No, although you might think so. Maintenance is only available during the day, during the week. When things go wrong on the weekends or at night, Mr. or Mrs. Green will call upstairs. If I’m home, I try to help.” She opened a closet door, pulled out a box of light bulbs from the shelf inside and grabbed a hanger for Shane. “I’ll be right back.”

Shane tossed his coat on the back of a chair and held out his hand for the light bulb. “I’ll do it.”

With a sigh, she said, “Ordinarily, I’d say ‘no’ and do it myself, but I wouldn’t mind your help. It’s a tricky place to reach.”

Shane removed his tie and tossed it over his jacket. “Take me to it, then.”

She led him into her bedroom and noticed him glancing around and smiling. She always made her bed and kept it neat, but maybe he was noticing some of the more personal touches. Her comforter was a rose satin with a georgette bed-skirt and shams. Her vanity held a tray of perfumes, and oddly enough, she hadn’t used any tonight.

She drew back her rose satin curtains and the white sheers. “It’s out on the fire escape,” she said. “I hate going out there. I hate the idea of criminals breaking into the building more, though.”

Shane removed a cuff link and set it on her dresser. Natalie enjoyed watching men roll up their sleeves. She wasn’t sure what it was about the simple act that made it so sexy, but she was suddenly glad she had allowed Shane the honor of changing the bulb for her.

She unlocked and opened the window next to her bed. Shane’s tanned, muscled forearms flexed as he gradually revealed one and then the other. She nearly drooled. He must have seen her staring because his smile widened and his eyes sparkled. His movements slowed, becoming more deliberate, as if he were doing a striptease.

Natalie cleared her throat. “Um, I’ll just go, and...”

“Hey, you’re going to spot me in case I fall, aren’t you? You know how rusty and rickety these old things are.” His eyes said he had something up his sleeve besides nice, sinewy arms.

“Oh, sure. You shouldn’t fall, but if you’d feel better, I’ll hang onto you...or something.”

He stepped through the window and winked. “Naw. Just be here when I get back.”

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

She nodded, staring at his twinkling eyes, and her throat went dry. Maybe she'd calm down and figure out what he was up to in a moment. As soon as he was out on the fire escape, she stepped over to her closet and hung up her sweater.

"Arghhh!"

Natalie whipped around to see white fingers gripping her windowsill. "Oh, my God! Hang on Shane!" She rushed to the window and leaned out.

There he was, crouched underneath it. When he saw her, he cackled his head off.

"I can't believe you did that! I nearly had a heart attack."

He was still chuckling as he stepped inside. "Sorry, construction humor." He took her shoulders and pulled her close. Enveloped in a warm, protective hug, she didn't know whether to forgive him or not.

"Were you really worried about me?" he purred in her ear.

"Yes, damn it. Don't do things like that to me."

He tipped her chin up and smiled into her eyes. "I can think of several other things I'd rather do to you." He swooped in and captured her lips. His finger traced her jaw and ear so gently, she shivered. He brushed the dark hair away from her face, cupped the back of her head and pushed against her lips harder. As she opened to him, her heart began to pound. His tongue sought hers and swirled with it.

She could feel his ragged breathing and his hand moving over her back. He stroked the length of her and paused to cup her bottom. When he squeezed, she couldn't help her reaction any more than she could have prevented a landslide. Her stomach tightened, her womb clenched, and her breath caught in her throat. His velvety tongue withdrew from her mouth and slid to her ear as she moaned. She felt an airy flutter as if soft fairy wings beat nearby. His hot breath whispered, "I want you, Natalie."

She tried to step away so she could breathe. She only got far enough to look up at his face. The heated arousal in his eyes scorched her. Blood flowed into her face and she felt her temperature rise. "Shane, I..." Whatever she had been meaning to say vanished from her mind. His sexual magnetism drew her to him. He peered at her intently raking his gaze over her face down to her breasts and back up. She closed her eyes and found his lips on hers again. Her heart turned inside out.

He gripped her body and crushed her to him, stoking her fire. Her breasts ached for his touch, and she ground her chest into his hard abdomen. Her feet seemed to be drifting, as if on a cloud, and then she sensed herself leaving the floor. Her body became supine, completely given over to his control, and he carried her to the bed.

She felt his fingers plying the buttons of her blouse until each one popped open. His hand slipped around her back and unfastened her bra. He cupped her bare breast with

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

his whole hand, stroking the hardened nipple and she arched into it. Unable to help herself, she moaned into his mouth. She wanted him to do savage things to her.

“Natalie, honey,” he whispered.

She half-opened her heavy eyelids and stared at his moist, swollen mouth. She watched it move, but felt she was hearing him from far away.

“I’m going to get undressed. Any objections?”

She shook her head. “Please turn off the light, first.”

He grinned and unbuttoned his shirt while he walked to the light switch next to the door. “I want to see you naked before I turn it off.”

“Forget it.”

He shrugged and switched off the light. He finished stripping right there in the dim light from the next room. She rolled off the bed, pulled down the covers, and quickly shed the rest of her clothes. Standing in the doorway, his body produced a glowing silhouette. She could see the length and thickness of his arousal. She jumped into bed and began to pull the sheet up.

He was next to her in an instant and ripped the sheet out of her hand. “No. Let me see you.” Before she could protest, he ran his hands over her torso from her neck through her cleavage over her stomach to her lightly covered mound. She lowered her back to the mattress and let him possess her while she moaned, softly. “I don’t mind you looking at me like you’re reading a book of Braille.”

“Why are women embarrassed about their bodies? Females are much more beautiful than males with all the curves and softness.”

“I may have soft spots I’m not exactly proud of.”

“Oh yeah? Let me find them.” Shane proceeded to tickle every soft spot he could get a hold of as she shrieked and thrashed, trying to wriggle away from his torturous fingers.

“Stop! Cut it out. No more.”

“What are the magic words?”

Natalie wanted to punch him and say the magic word was him yelling “Oww.” The man was merciless. “Stop it, Shane. I mean it.” Her giggles had turned to gasps.

He eased up and said, “I’ll stop, but you haven’t said the magic words, yet. You know what they say about ticklishness?”

Her sides ached, but she managed to answer him, hoping he’d stop if she said it. “That it means you’re horny?”

“Oh, is that what it means?”

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

He tickled her some more, but not significantly. Her skin was still so sensitized that she jumped about a foot off the mattress and laughed again.

“Hmm. You must be horny, then.”

“If I say I am, will you stop?”

“If you say you are, I’ll do something else.”

“I am.” She hadn’t really planned to make love tonight, but she really *was* horny. Her center was craving to be filled. And as she had just witnessed, there were worse things he could do to her.

He rested a stilled hand on her stomach and leaned over her. “You’re beautiful, Natalie. Every inch of you.”

Her pussy was dripping, it was so wet. She reached around his neck and pulled his face to hers so she could kiss him. He suddenly became tender and rubbed his open lips back and forth over hers. Then he nibbled them and let his mouth kiss across her face to her ear. He nipped her earlobe and worked his way down her neck. She shivered.

His hand moved lower, descending from her tummy to her thigh. She wanted his mouth on her breasts, suckling. She arched as his mouth drew near. He took the hint and fastened onto one distended nipple. Sucking it soundly, his hand made its way to her apex and blood flowed into her quivering clit. As soon as he touched her there, her nerves short-circuited. She arched into his hand and moaned. Ripples of fire rumbled through her, and she tossed her head from side to side. He moved to the other breast and suckled that one just as thoroughly. He did a slow, circular massage around her clit, but didn’t quite touch the magic, swollen bundle of nerves. She writhed in agony.

“Please, Shane...for the love of God.”

He let her breast pop out of his mouth and leaned back, gazing at her face with a satisfied smile. His fingers found her opening and slid inside, stroking slowly in and out of her slippery center. “Please what, Natalie?” His voice was low and smooth, completely in control.

“Oh God!” she ground out. “What are the damn magic words? I’ll say anything if you’ll let me come.”

“I want to hear you say, that you want me.”

“I want you, Shane!” Her vaginal muscles clamped his fingers frantically. Hot desire readied her to be swept to sweet release. “Take me there, please.”

His fingers left her pussy, tapped her knees and she spread her legs wide for him. She didn’t care if he finished her off with his finger, his mouth, or his cock. She was ready to come with the slightest touch.

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

He positioned himself between her legs and poised himself at her opening. “Do you want me to fuck you, Natalie?”

“Yes...yes,” she begged.

He plunged his cock into her opening all the way up to the hilt, and her cunt exploded. She jerked and cried out. He rode her hard, grinding into her pussy. She was flying and her body was completely out of her control. Before she touched down, another orgasm rolled right through her like the other side of a hurricane. She spasmed under his relentless attention, yet still he thrust into her without letting up. She felt like she was drowning and gurgled her bliss.

If she didn’t focus on giving him his pleasure, she’d lose her mind. Passion and desire gripped his face. He was deep in concentration, so without a word she met his thrusts with her own and clenched her pussy muscles around his penis. He pounded into her center and she gripped the sheets with her fists. Dear God, was she building to another climax? She arched her back right off the bed. She knew she was going to come a third time, and this time he crashed over the edge, grunting, taking her with him.

He held her tight and rolled over so that she was on top. He allowed her a short respite to breathe before he began smoothing her damp hair away from her face.

“Thank you, my Queen.”

She giggled between deep breaths. “Queen, huh?”

“Absolutely.”

She angled her mouth over his and kissed him. He twisted her hair behind her head and held her there, deepening the kiss and teasing her with his tongue.

When he finally let her lips leave his she said, “Ick, I’m all sweaty.”

He laughed, heartily. “No one’s ever said, ‘Ick’ to me afterwards. Am I doing some thing wrong, my sweet?”

“Hell no!”

“I’ll take that as a compliment, then.” He rolled her onto her side and slipped out of her. As he stood, her eyes followed him and traveled the length of his body. He stood proudly in the dim light from the next room, letting her look her fill.

“Natalie, I...”

“I know. You have to get going. You have to get up early for a ‘thing.’ You’re best man in your friend’s wedding or something.”

Shane stood immobile with his hands on his hips and stared at her, mute.

She propped herself on her elbows. “It’s okay. I mean, I understand.”

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

“Will you stop blathering for a minute?” He saw her eyes open wide and wondered if she was offended, but so what if she was? So was he. “I’m going to the bathroom to wash up, and then I want to do some of the things to you that we skipped over.”

“Oh...sorry.” Tension left her voice. “Go ahead. I’ll wait ‘til you’re done and clean up too.”

He saw the hint of a smile. Shane held out his hand. “Come with me. I’ll wash you, and you can wash me.”

“How can I say no to that?”

Shane wanted the water nice and steamy before they got in. Natalie enjoyed looking over his taut body every time he turned and tested the water temperature. His tan covered his entire upper half, from his neck to his lean hips. His member dangled nicely as did his generous sack.

She felt as if she were under some kind of spell. Maybe that tealeaf reader was really a witch and cast some sort of spell over her and the next man she met. She wouldn’t doubt it. But if this was just a spell, she hoped it would never wear off.

Finally he turned and said, “The water’s nice and hot. Have you looked at my ass enough?”

She gasped then giggled. “Never enough.”

“Good.” He grinned, then stepped in sending the forceful spray everywhere. Sheepishly, he said, “Looks like we’ll clean ourselves and the bathroom at the same time.”

“How convenient.”

He held his hand out to Natalie and she stepped in without worrying about sopping up the floor first.

As soon as she closed the shower curtain, he dropped to his knees and held her in place with his hands around her ass. “I’m going to clean the dirtiest part, right now.”

She saw his tongue headed for her pussy, and said, “Wait. Don’t you want me to wash the area, first?”

“You nurses worry too much about cleanliness.” He dove in and licked her clit right away.

She moaned and arched against the wall, giving him fuller access to her cunt. She shuddered as he licked up and down her labia, through the folds, and even swirled his tongue in her opening.

“Oh, God.”

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

Shane glanced up at her and grinned. "Never been cleaned this way before?"

"Never," she said, breathily.

He returned his attention to her clit and laved it over and around, as she stifled a whimper. Finally, he concentrated on the swollen nub of her arousal. She moaned out loud and liquefied, sagging against the back of the shower.

He inserted first one finger into her vagina, then another. She wove her fingers through his hair and reveled in the feel of having oral sex and being finger fucked at the same time. Of course, she had experienced that combination before, but never with the steam of a shower adding to her own sensuous heat.

She rocked against his fingers, once, twice, then exploded. The thrill of his fingers filling her while rubbing her highly sensitized clit sent lightning bolts through her. She bucked against the shower wall, crying out.

"Stop," she begged.

When he didn't, she started to sob. He looked up and concern filled his face. He withdrew his fingers quickly and held her hips. "Are you all right, darlin'?"

She nodded and tried to hide her face against her shoulder.

He stood and wrapped her in his arms. "It seems like I can't do anything right, tonight. What is it, Natalie? Tell me."

"I..." She tried to answer, but couldn't because she didn't know what the answer was.

Shane just held her, wrapped in his strong arms until she stopped shaking.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what that was about. I do know that you didn't do anything wrong, though." She managed a shy smile.

"Well, I was going to turn you around and do your back, but..."

"I think it's your turn." She looked up at him through lowered lashes and one side of her mouth curled up. "After all, you're a dirty, dirty boy."

They traded places and Natalie kneeled under the warm spray. She had cooled, so the warm water falling over her back, running around her torso and down her legs, felt heavenly.

Shane's cock was already beginning to rise and stiffen. She took it in her hand and let her eyes wander over the satin, reddening skin. She licked around the sensitive head and slid her tongue down and around his shaft like it was a barber's pole.

He braced on hand against the wall, closed his eyes and let out a soft moan.

She returned her moist lips to the top and sucked his firm cock into her warm, wet mouth. She pulled back, slowly, using moderate suction.

"Oh...I like that, baby."

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

If he liked it, she'd do it again, and again...then more and faster. And she wouldn't stop, just as he hadn't when she asked him to. It would serve him right.

Shane groaned as she went down on him exactly how she had planned it. She glanced up at his face and saw his eyes roll. That filled her with deep inner, evil satisfaction. He was getting close. She sucked him hard while massaging and squeezing his balls. He let out a loud moan and she suddenly switched. She licked and sucked his balls while sliding her hands up and down his cock. She was driving him into a frenzy of need and she knew it.

She returned her mouth to his bursting cock and sucked hard and fast. When she inserted her finger into his anus, he groaned out loud and tried to pull her head away. "I'm gonna come, baby. I don't want to do it in your face."

She held him in deep with the strongest suction she had and consumed him until he growled and begged her to stop. When she didn't, he shot into her mouth.

While his body jerked, Natalie milked him and gulped down every drop, making sure he experienced all the aftershocks.

At last he stilled, and she let his dick fall from her mouth. Shane gaped at her in amazement, offered her his hand and helped her up. He pulled her into his arms and delivered a long, deep, almost reverent kiss.

When their lips parted, he went down on one knee in front of her and crossed his hands over his thigh. "I bow to you my queen. You have slayed me, and I offer you my admiration and devotion."

"Rise, good sir," she said. "For it is you who have conquered me."

Chapter Four

Waking up in Shane's arms the following morning, Natalie had to admit she had just spent the most exciting night of her sexual life, up to that point. After having oral sex in the shower, they went back to bed for one more round of foreplay and fucking. Complete exhaustion had then set in, carrying her off to a restful, rejuvenating sleep. She felt like she could take on the world this morning.

But with him, who knew? He seemed to find a powerful release each time, but she wondered if this was really as incredible for him as he made it seem. He had referred to others before her in an oblique way, giving her the impression that there may have been many.

He stirred and opened his eyes. Glancing over at her, his eyes crinkled at the corners and his lips turned up, as if awareness of their night together slowly dawned. He pulled her close and kissed her forehead. "Good morning, my Queen."

She had to admit, she liked her new nickname. She liked her new lover too, a lot. He pulled back the sheet and ran his hand over her torso, making her quiver. She had lost all shyness about revealing her body to him. After all, he had seen, touched, and worshipped every inch of it. He insisted she was beautiful all over, and, more importantly, he made her believe it.

He stroked upward until his fingers traced her jaw and bottom lip. "That was quite a night. Was it good for you, too?"

She burst out laughing. He grinned.

He must know I experienced complete ecstasy, multiple times, the nut.

"Uh huh." She stroked the stubble on his chin. "So did *you* enjoy yourself?" As much as she hadn't intended it, her insecurity came through in her voice.

He raised himself up on one elbow and looked at her with disbelief. "Lover, I don't think I've *ever* enjoyed myself so much. In fact, I wouldn't mind enjoying myself with you again, right now."

"First thing in the morning?"

"Why not? You've got something against mornings?"

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

She smiled and slipped her arms around his neck. "Not anymore. But you must be starving. Would you like some breakfast first?"

He nuzzled her neck and murmured, "If I can't have you for breakfast, I suppose."

She bounded out of bed, and wrapped herself in her silky blue robe. *Now, what to make for breakfast?* She hadn't expected company. While she was in the bathroom, she took a mental inventory of the contents of her refrigerator and pantry and came up with something.

He was standing in the hall, naked, stretching like a cat. With his arms overhead, back arched, and leg muscles quivering, she stopped and stared. Every inch of him was muscle. Glorious, hard, rippling muscle.

When he relaxed, she cocked an eyebrow. "Show off."

He grinned at her and she grinned in response as if their faces were stuck in permanent smiles.

"I'll get breakfast started while you're washing up."

"I won't be long," he said. As they passed each other, they paused for a peck on the lips.

As soon as Shane had choked down the dried out scrambled eggs and nearly burnt English muffins that Natalie had made for breakfast, he insisted that she relax while he cleared the table. He eyed the countertop and figured it might be just about the right height. There was only a bowl of fruit in the middle. He piled all the dishes in the sink, snatched the bowl of fruit and brought it to Natalie, still sitting at the dinette table.

"Oh, no thanks. I'm full. I usually just put fruit on cereal in the morning," she said.

"Okay." He took a banana and peeled it. He ate it slowly, gazing at her beautiful blue eyes and enjoying the contentment he saw there. "I love fucking you, Natalie."

She smiled and glanced at her lap. "I have to admit I love fucking you, too."

"So, do we have a standing Saturday night date? Rain or shine? No need to worry or ask, only confirm?"

She looked up at him with an expression that beamed ease and relief.

"Good." Shane pulled her chair out, grabbed her underneath her thighs and lifted her. As he expected her to do, she squealed and grabbed him around the neck.

Between giggles she asked, "What are you doing?"

Shane didn't answer. He simply walked to the counter and sat her on the end of it. With a husky voice, he said, "Lie back." He was already hard. All he wanted to do was get her wet and plunge right in.

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

“But don’t you have a little old lady to drive to church or something?”

“Are you trying to get rid of me?”

“Not at all! I just wanted to be sure...”

“The little old lady can walk,” he ground out. He unzipped and dropped his pants. She gave him a coy look. “So does that mean I can ride?”

“It sure does.” He untied her robe and helped her shrug out of it.

Natalie reclined on the counter and Shane leaned over to lick her pussy. He went right for her clit. She arched and let out a long moan, as if the bud were overly sensitized. She was wet almost immediately. Her cheeks deepened to dusky rose and she shivered under his ministrations. He grasped her hands and held them to her breasts. She ran her fingers over her pebbled nipples while he lapped and teased her pussy. She moaned even louder. Shane loved the sight before him. A sexy, sensuous woman, cupping, squeezing and stroking her own breasts, while she writhed with every motion of his tongue. He inserted two fingers in her hot, slick vagina and finger-fucked her. Shortly, he poked another finger into her anus and concentrated his tongue on her clit. She went nuts. She let go of her breasts and held onto the sides of the counter as if preventing a launch into the next room.

Her orgasm broke over her. She was bucking and screaming while thrashing, wildly. Shane grabbed onto her hips, still licking her clit, and let her ride it out to the very end. Eventually, she whimpered and panted out, “That’s it. No more.”

He let go of her and straightened his posture. “I’m afraid we’re not quite finished. I have some wild fucking to do.”

With her eyes still closed, she said, “I’m a limp noodle. Do what you will. I couldn’t stop you if I wanted to,” and chuckled.

Shane yanked her toward him until her hips teetered on the edge of the counter. “Drape your legs over my shoulders,” he ground out, sounding horse to his own ears.

“Do it for me. I can’t move.”

Shane grinned, pleased with the idea of turning his lover’s muscles liquid. He raised one shapely leg, laid its dead weight over his shoulder, and then the other. His cock nudged the entrance to her drenched cunt. He didn’t ask if she was ready. He penetrated hard.

As his shaft disappeared, she enveloped the sensitive skin with her muscular passage, and he reared back, groaning. An electrical fire spread along his nerves. He built his rhythm up until he was pistoning inside of her. A primitive guttural noise escaped from his throat as heated blood roared through his ears. He grit his teeth and slid toward the sharp edge of climax. With the full power of his arousal, he pounded into her.

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

Her inner body clenched his searing flesh. He roared out his orgasm as he came. She cried out and shook. Her cunt quivered and wept.

Feeling as though he might pass out, he let go of her hips and braced his hands on the counter.

Monday morning, Natalie floated down the sidewalk on her way to work with a smile on her face. Shane had left her apartment Sunday morning about an hour after telling her that he had just experienced the most mind-blowing orgasms of his life. He had a regularly scheduled Sunday dinner invitation at his Aunt's house and offered to cancel, but she wouldn't let him. She liked the fact that this guy believed in some predictability in his life, and she knew they would have plenty of opportunities for great, no, *mind-blowing* sex in the future. Lots and lots of luscious, lascivious frantic fucking. She wondered if the tealeaf reader saw *that* in her future?

Approaching the job site next door, she scanned the young workers looking for the tall, lanky, blond boss. When she didn't see him, her mood sunk a notch. Her eyes downcast, she followed the walkway up the stairs and into the front door.

There he stood.

She looked up into his glowing, ocean-blue eyes and they twinkled. He pulled a rectangular box from behind his back and handed it to her without a word.

"Is this for me?"

He leaned toward her ear and whispered, "No, it's for the other beautiful, brunette nurse I want to make love to every weekend."

She couldn't resist the urge to kiss him and planted a moist one on his leathery cheek, giving it a sexy little lick at the end. *Mmm. Salty.* "Thank you. Can I open it, now?"

"Better wait until you get home unless you want to be scandalized right here in the foyer."

She squinted at him. "Why? What's in the box?"

He just winked.

"Tell me!"

"Not a chance. You'll have to be patient."

Now her curiosity would kill her all day. She stared at the box until an awkward silence settled over them.

At last Shane cleared his throat. "Let's just say it's something for next weekend, but you can give it back without opening it if..."

"No way in hell."

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

He chuckled. "I had hoped you'd say that. Listen, before I go, I want to be sure of one thing."

"And that is?"

He leveled his eyes at her wearing the most serious expression she had seen on his face so far. "I want to be sure you're not seeing anyone but me."

What now? Play it cool or tell him what he wants to hear and put him out of his misery? As she stood there mute, he placed his hands on her arms and stroked them gently. "You see, Natalie, I already have feelings for you, and I don't want to open my heart only to have it stepped on."

"That seems reasonable. What's in the box?"

He leaned back and laughed. "Resorting to bribery, huh?"

"Maybe just a little."

"Answer my question, or I'll take back the present." Shane leaned against the wall, hovering over her, looking damn smug.

She rolled her eyes. "Okay, you win. No, I'm not seeing anyone else."

"Good. Keep it that way."

He crushed her and the mystery box against his chest, delivering a long and powerful French kiss that took her breath away. When he released her, she saw Donor Code #7945 frozen in the doorway, gaping at her. She couldn't help the smirk that flitted across her face.

Gazing at Shane, and in her sexiest voice she said, "I'll see you next weekend, lover."

Liz smacked a sterile collection cup on the counter in front of the Donor # 7945 and said, "You know what to do," without her usual welcoming smile. Natalie winked at Liz and sashayed into the break room.

Liz hurried after her. "I hope that isn't some sort of guilt gift from *him*," she said, pointing her thumb toward the nurse's station.

"No, it's from Shane."

Liz raised an eyebrow. "So how was your evening with him?"

Natalie tried to sound nonchalant. "It was nice."

"That's it? Just nice?"

Natalie couldn't keep the grin from taking over. "It was *very* nice. The night and next morning were even better."

Liz beamed. "I told you!" and then nodding at the box, she asked, "What's that?"

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

Natalie frowned. "Something for next weekend, but I can't look at it until I get home."

"What? He gave you a gift and said you couldn't open it?"

She nodded, opened her locker, and set the box on the floor inside.

"Give me that," Liz demanded.

"No. He told me to be patient."

"Luckily that doesn't apply to me." Before Natalie could say another word, Liz had snatched the box and ripped it open.

It was the same gorgeous black dress he had bought for her, but with a note that boldly read, "Petite" pinned to the designer's label at the neck.

"Holy, shit," Natalie exclaimed. "It's a Stella McCartney. You didn't tell him I liked designer names, did you?"

"No, I didn't. Maybe he noticed your Prada bag and figured it out for himself."

Natalie snorted. "I doubt it. He couldn't even figure out that I wore a petite. The dress he bought originally would have been enormous on me."

Liz laughed. "I guess he's a real guy, then. He probably wanted to impress you, so he just bought the most expensive dress in the store."

Natalie stared at the stunning black dress, in her correct size, made by her favorite designer. "What should I do? It's too expensive a gift for a second date, yet I don't want to give it back and offend him."

Liz touched the slinky material and her eyes bulged. "I think it's silk. Put it on."

"I really shouldn't, especially if I'm not going to keep it." Sadly, she gazed at the dress of her dreams and knew that no matter how mind-blowing the sex was, she couldn't and wouldn't let him spend that much money on her.

"Why aren't you going to keep it? You said you didn't want to offend him, right?"

"I know, but..."

Liz shoved her toward the bathroom. "Just try it on. Please—for me?"

Natalie rolled her eyes, but closed the door to the restroom and gently removed the dress from the box. The minute she had it on, she knew she had made a mistake. It looked absolutely gorgeous on her. Even in the waist-high bathroom mirror, she saw the flirty hem hit her just above the knee and knew it was perfect. *Damn.*

"Are you coming out or what?" Liz's impatient voice jostled her out of her trance.

She opened the door and stood immobilized. She could tell by Liz's expression that her first impression had been correct.

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

“Well, come out here and turn around. I want to see you walk in it.”

Natalie took a few steps, turned and headed back toward the bathroom, but not before she noticed how beautifully it flowed around her body and how fabulous she felt in it. Why was he buying her clothes, anyway? Did he think she didn’t have any because she wore uniforms everyday? And why did she have to wait for the weekend to open a boxed dress? He had her thinking it was lingerie.

Liz grabbed her arm. “You have to have this dress.”

Natalie looked down and sighed. “I know. Maybe I can pay him back for it.”

“We’ll think of something. I’ve got to get back out there, but take as long a look at yourself in the mirror as you want. Damn, I wish I looked that good in *any* dress.”

Natalie avoided Shane during the days that followed, but he didn’t think much of it. She was a professional. He had probably broken some rule by kissing her in her place of work in front of one of her clients, so he concentrated on his job knowing they’d get together over the weekend, in privacy, where they could be as intimate as they liked. He had plenty to do too, and it was bad enough just being distracted by thoughts of her every six seconds.

The dozers were loading the last of the debris and hauling it away on Friday afternoon, just in time since he wanted his whole weekend free. He hadn’t told her yet, but he was taking her to a charity benefit—in New York. He had pictured a romantic ride in a horse drawn carriage around Central Park first. Since she said she’d be seeing only him, he figured she’d be free too.

It was about time to spring his surprise. He waved to the dump truck driver as the last load was hauled away, brushed the dust off his jeans, and headed over to the clinic.

He hoped she’d be able to go away for the whole weekend, but even if all they had was Saturday afternoon and night in the big apple, that would be okay too. He approached the desk and when she looked up an automatic smile lit up her face. Good, she wasn’t upset with him, anyway. Her aloofness was probably as he thought. She was being professional.

“Hi, stranger. Care to make a donation?”

“I’m scheduled for my physical next week. Until then, I’ll just practice,” he teased.

She lowered her voice and said, “I don’t think you need any practice.”

“Yeah, and with you around I don’t need any of those men’s magazines either.”

She grinned.

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

"I'm here to take you away for a mystery weekend. Go home and pack that box and whatever else you'd like to just kick around in. Don't open the box yet, though."

A shadow of doubt passed over her face. "I, uh..." Biting her bottom lip, she lowered her eyes from his face to her lap.

He cocked his head as she hesitated and wondered what she could be worried about. She knew he wasn't a serial killer by now. She couldn't have another date. Or could she?

She heaved a deep sigh. "I already opened it."

He was relieved and disappointed at the same time. She ruined his surprise, but at least she didn't have other plans. "Oh." He tucked his hands in his pockets.

"I'm sorry, Shane. Liz grabbed the box, and before I could stop her..."

"Don't worry about it, hon. It would have been fun to see the surprise on your face, but I still have plenty of surprises left."

"Whew, I'm glad you're not upset."

"No. I don't get upset over little stuff. Can you get away for the weekend, though?"

"I didn't have any other plans, but a whole weekend together so soon? I'm not sure that's a good idea."

He leaned on the counter. "Why? Are you afraid you'll get sick of me or that I'll wear you out?"

"No, but I'm worried that you might get sick of *me*."

"Not gonna happen."

Natalie smiled, grabbed a clipboard, some papers, stood and walked around the desk. "And there's another thing we have to talk about."

"Uh oh."

"Nothing serious. Don't worry. Let's go to the interview room."

If it wasn't serious, why did she have to speak to him privately? This wasn't going the way he had planned it at all. She led the way and he followed, closing the door behind them.

Natalie was about to sit in the chair with the desk attached, but before she could, he pulled her upright and into his arms. He hoped that a reminder of their mutual passion would make her forget whatever she was going to say, especially if it was going to ruin his surprise. Bending to her lips, he placed a hand behind her head and drew her to him. At first he was gentle, just nibbling, and then he couldn't control his yearning for her another minute and crushed his mouth to hers. She responded on a visceral level and opened to him.

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

When he finally allowed her lips to leave his, she sighed. "Let's not start that again." She waved the clipboard still in her hand. "That's why we didn't get this paperwork finished the last time you came in."

Relieved, he chuckled. "Is that what this is about?"

"Partially. But we need to go over the form, so let's get that out of the way, first."

"Okay, nurse Natalie. Let's do it."

His eyes twinkled and he raised his eyebrows when he said, *do it*. This wasn't going to be easy, but she had to stay focused. One of her concerns in going away with him was the idea that she still didn't know him that well. She intuitively felt as if she could trust him, but if something did happen, she'd feel pretty stupid before being raped and murdered. Why add to the misery?

"I need to verify the information. Can I see your driver's license?"

Shane pulled his wallet from his back pocket and handed the license to her without protest. She scanned his address and date of birth. They matched the form.

"Is this address the Harbor towers?"

"Yep."

"Whew. No bodies buried in the backyard, then." *Unless he meant the ocean!*

He simply chuckled.

Stop it, Natalie. He was joking. He's always joking.

"Okay, your year of birth is 1969?"

"A very good year."

Hmm, they hadn't tried the sixty-nine position yet. *For God's sake, I've got to get a hold of myself or we'll never get this damn form finished!*

"I can verify your physical description by looking at you, so we can skip that part." *Oh, but how I love looking at your blue eyes, straight blond hair, and two hundred pounds of solid muscle.*

"What are your ancestral origins and religion again?"

"Irish mother, Irish father, and recovering Roman Catholic."

She smiled and nodded. "Education?"

"I already told you. High School, four-years of college, and then two years of graduate school. My major and minor as an undergrad were business and music. I earned an MBA in graduate school. I plan to get a CPA and save the company the expense of an accountant. But even more than that, I want to marry the right woman and start a family."

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

Why did he say that? Ambitions weren't on the form. Did he think she was the right woman? *Cut that out, Natalie. Just get the facts straight.*

"Your parents are in good health?"

"My father retired, but both parents are in good health. He was driving my mother crazy for a while after his retirement, but she didn't require medication." Again, he shot her that teasing grin.

She rolled her eyes and handed him the clipboard. "Okay, wise-guy. Sign the bottom, and then tell me why you're buying me expensive dresses."

Shane signed the form with a flourish and handed it back to her. With a sly smile, he said, "I bought the designer dress in a wearable size, because even though you're a tasty morsel when you're naked, I might like to take you to elegant places that require clothes."

She shook her head. "You're incorrigible."

He folded his arms and cocked his head. "Don't worry. You'll learn to love that about me."

Liz had Shane's address, phone number, cell phone number and license number. Natalie felt she had covered herself well enough to go away with him for one night, but didn't agree to two. Leave him wanting more, Liz had advised.

Natalie still didn't know where he was taking her, so she prepared for anything. Scratching her head, she mentally ran through the list she had made and checked off everything that was already in her garment bag. Toiletries, casual cool clothes, dressy cool clothes, casual warm clothes, dressy warm clothes, one pair of casual and dressy shoes, one pair of casual and dressy sandals, sneakers, socks, pantyhose, stockings, garters, lingerie, a bathing suit, and a spa robe. Finally, on top of everything, she lovingly packed the silky Stella McCartney dress that still took her breath away.

Shane had insisted that she keep it and refused to take a dime. She shook her head remembering how he said he'd take it if they broke up, and then jokingly said that the dress would keep them together through the tough times. What a nut. He was right about one thing. She was learning to love that about him.

He was due any minute, and she couldn't wait to see him. When the phone rang, she bounded into the living room to answer it. Maybe he had some last minute instructions that would let her know where they were going. She'd love to lighten her suitcase if she could get him to give up a hint.

"Hello?"

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

“Natalie, promise you’ll hear everything I have to say, and you won’t hang up on me.” Shane’s voice was deadly serious.

Shit. This can’t be good. “I’ll do my best.”

“Please. This is important. You’ll need to take down a phone number. Do you have a pencil and paper handy?”

“Uh, yeah. Hang on a sec.” Alarmed by his urgency, she jogged to the kitchen and grabbed the pad of paper she used for shopping lists. “Got it. Now, tell me what’s wrong.”

“First, here’s my brother, Liam’s phone number. 555-4903. Did you get that?”

Frowning, Natalie jotted down the number. “Okay, I wrote it down. Now, are you going to tell me why?”

“Because I need him to come to the Charles Street jail and bail me out.”

Natalie’s mouth went dry. She couldn’t speak. Not one word would come out of her mouth.

“Listen, hon, I only get one phone call. I called you so you wouldn’t think I stood you up. I was in an accident on the way to your place. When the cops came, I had to get my registration out of my glove compartment and something fell out. A switchblade that I took away from my cousin’s kid last weekend. I tried to explain it to the cop, but all he cared about was the fact that it was an illegal weapon, so here I am—under arrest.”

Natalie’s mind was whirling. Was he telling the truth? If so, was it really his nephew’s knife? Or did Shane use it on unsuspecting girlfriends? “I—I’ll call your brother.”

“Thanks, hon. I’m sorry about our plans for tonight. Since they were out of state, I doubt I’ll be able to go, but I’ll call you as soon as I get out of here.”

She uttered a chilly, “Don’t bother,” and hung up.

Damn. Just when I thought...

Natalie slumped onto her couch and cried.

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

Chapter Five

Shane ran his hands through his hair and slumped over his desk. Liz had called his cell phone and said that his physical had been cancelled, and due to the recent arrest, he was no longer eligible to be a donor. When he asked about Natalie, Liz had just said, “I’m sorry. I tried.”

He wanted to call her at work, but he knew that wasn’t the place or time for a personal discussion, and it would be too easy for her to say so and hang up on him.

Each time he had tried to call her at home, her answering machine greeted him. He must have left a dozen messages, and none had been returned. Instead of getting upset, he let her have a few days to calm down. He was sure that once she realized it wasn’t his fault, and that he *had* used his only phone call from jail to cancel their date instead of standing her up, she’d have to see reason. But so far that hadn’t happened.

Now what? He had to talk to her. The job was finished and he was supposed to be starting another one soon. Ambush seemed to be the only option.

Natalie approached the weekend with a mixture of dread and relief. It had been a rough week. She welcomed the long walks home on nice days, but today the weather matched her mood. Dismal. Still grieving over the loss of the relationship that had barely started, she avoided eye contact on the sidewalk and on the subway. Her emotions wouldn’t leave her alone, forcing her to obsess about Shane, her rigid criteria for dating, and what the hell she should do about all his phone calls. He had treated her with all the care and respect she had been craving for so long, and losing that brought a lump to her throat.

Somehow, it had felt so right. She “just knew” she’d finally found the perfect man. How wrong could she be? Could she trust her own judgment? Liz had been hounding her all week to call him. Maybe she was right, but it was probably too late now since he had stopped calling and leaving messages.

She turned up her raincoat’s collar against the misty rain as she climbed the dirty underground stairs and resurfaced at street level. Following the cobblestones, she trudged up the steep hill to her sanctuary. Pausing, she looked up toward her apartment

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

through tear-filled eyes and sighed. Her home would be cold and empty. Yet it was private, and she had to have the good cry she had been holding in all week. *Damn him.* “Crusher” had crushed her.

She had just turned the key in the lock and stepped inside when Mrs. Green’s door opened. *Oh no. What does she want me to fix now?* A large figure stepped into the hall—too large to be Mrs. Green. Turning her head, she looked up into the sad blue eyes of Shane Derby.

“Natalie,” was all he said, but it was the way he said it that *almost* melted her icy heart. His voice was soft and raspy, as if he needed a good cry too.

Mrs. Green appeared behind him. “I hope you don’t mind, dear. I let him wait with me instead of out in the hall.” She looked up at Shane and her eyes twinkled. “We’ve had a lovely chat. It seems as if you’ve finally found yourself a nice young man.” She winked at Natalie and closed the door.

An awkward silence followed. Finally Natalie said, “I guess you came for the dress? You’re in luck. It’s never been worn.”

“Keep it. I came because we need to talk.”

He was so serious. She sighed, wondering what she wanted to happen. Part of her wanted to run into her apartment and slam the door in his face. Another part of her, a much larger part, wanted to dive into his arms and kiss him like crazy. But she couldn’t. How would she tell her family she had fallen in love with a jailbird?

As that thought struck, she froze. Her keys in midair, she stood immobile in front of her apartment door. *Have I fallen in love?*

“Please don’t worry,” he was saying. “All I want to do is talk.”

She processed his words slowly. Too slowly. She was still stuck on integrating her own startling realization.

He reached for her keys and startled her out of her trance.

“Oh, I—I’m sorry,” she stammered. “I just remembered that I have to be somewhere soon. I can only talk for a few minutes.” *There. That will keep me from falling into bed with him. I hope.* She knew she needed to spend a little more time thinking about this clearly. There was no way she could remain logical and dispassionate with him standing there all tall, tan, and muscular, smelling like expensive cologne. Her mouth began to water—and so did her damn eyes. *Stop it, Natalie. Wait until you hear what he has to say.*

Shane took the keys from her and opened the door. He stood aside to let her enter, then followed and closed the door, gently, behind him. She set her purse on an end table and perched on the edge of her overstuffed chair.

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

He sat on the couch, leaned over the arm, and looked into her eyes with purpose. "I love you, Natalie."

Of all the things she had thought he might say, that wasn't one of them. She blinked rapidly, hoping not to cry. "But how is that possible?"

"I know what I want in a woman, and you're all of it. I want an intelligent woman with good, humanitarian values. Someone who can speak her mind and stand up for what she believes is right. Someone who knows her worth and won't allow anyone to treat her like dirt."

He stood and walked over to stand in front of her. Then, as if he wanted to put them on equal footing, he squatted in front of her and took her shaking hands in his. "But I also want someone who can give her heart and her body to me without reservations, shame or regret. I want someone who can make me a better person because I want to deserve her."

Natalie couldn't hold back the tears any longer. Neither could she hold back her heart or her body. She let go of his hands, leaned forward, and melted into him. He grasped her and crushed her to his chest. She felt his hot breath in deep gusts on her neck.

"I love you, too," she managed to whimper.

He pulled away enough to smile into her eyes. Then she saw that wicked twinkle in his eyes and the creases in the corners appear.

"What do you love about me?" he asked.

"Everything." The damn burst and she sobbed. Her family would just have to understand. She was in love with a jailbird, and that was that.

He stood and lifted her with him, then sat her on his lap. Almost as if she were a crying child, he soothed her with comforting words murmured into her hair. He stroked her back and placed sweet little kisses on her right temple, and then worked his way down her jaw, over to her waiting mouth.

How someone with such a forceful personality could turn into the gentlest soul she'd ever known mystified her. She hoped prison wouldn't change him.

"So how long do we have before you stand trial?"

He shook his head and smiled. "There isn't going to be one. Every member of my family came to my hearing and gave the same explanation. They each swore that I had taken the knife away from my cousin's kid that day and put it in my glove compartment until I could dispose of it properly. My nephew even confessed that it was his and told them where he got it. He'll be doing some community service."

"Thank goodness you have a supportive family who loves you."

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

“They’re going to love you too. I want you to meet them. How about tomorrow?”

“I don’t see why not. After all, tomorrow’s Saturday, our standing date night.”

“Soon I want every night to be our standing date night.”

“So do I, my love. So do I.”

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

About the Author

Cyndi Redding describes herself as an Almond Joy bar. She's a little nutty, a little flaky, but basically sweet--desiring only to give readers a delicious, mouth-watering experience. In her former life, working primarily as a psychiatric nurse and an RN with the American Red Cross, she developed an off-the-wall sense of humor that she credits with what sanity she has left. She wrote screenplays, mostly romantic comedies, for several years and loves to push the envelope going for an NC-17 rating whenever possible.

Also available from Cyndi Redding and Venus Press

Death by Delilah

Sons of Zeus, Show Me the Bling

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

WELL HUNG

BY

ISABELLE DRAKE

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

Dedication:

For D.

Thanks for listening while I chatter on and for letting me listen while you chatter on.(!)

Chapter One

Liam Derby stretched, letting the scarred back of the wood chair smack against the wall as he scanned the early evening bar crowd. The tall stools near the televisions were packed with local Red Sox fans, but none of the people were anyone he knew.

Thank God.

“Need another, cowboy?”

After glancing at the nearly empty Rolling Rock bottle nestled in his right palm, he nodded to the overly attentive waitress. “Sure, thanks.”

She started to walk away, but hesitated, turning back to eye him cautiously from beneath dark lashes. “Um...Can I ask you a question?”

He lifted his eyebrows, silently inviting her to continue.

She pushed a few stray, red curls off her cheek and giggled. “Is it true you--I mean cowboys...have sex with your, um--I mean their...hats on?”

Liam wanted to ask her, ‘have you ever seen an Irish cowboy?’ but that might force him into having to explain why he, a city slicker construction worker, was wearing a cowboy hat and an absurd Western-style shirt. The last thing he wanted to do was explain *that*. So, instead, he winked, and replied slowly enough to mask his Boston born-and-bred accent. “I never kiss and tell.”

Her gaze darted up to the fresh-out-of-the-box black Stetson sitting atop his head down to his denim-covered crotch, and then skittered back to his stunned face. But instead of saying something--which would have been the decent thing to do--she scooted off, dodging between the tables and giggling as she slid behind the bar.

Jesus.

Liam was about to check his watch, again, but the vibration of his phone stopped him short.

He flipped it open and checked the display.

Crusher.

“Where the hell are you?” he asked, not bothering with pleasantries like hello.

No reply from his brother, only deep laughter.

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

“What the hell...? I’m sitting here in this fucking hat and this hideous shirt, nearly getting mauled by the waitresses, and all you can do is laugh?”

“So you’re wearing it? The hat? And the shirt?”

“Yes. And yes.” Liam glanced down at the snug, red and yellow-flowered shirt and fingered one of the white pearl snap buttons. “The least you could have done was gotten me a shirt that fits.”

After another burst of laughter, Crusher came back with, “Oh shit, I wish I could see it.”

“What do you mean *wish*?”

His brother replied, but the words were lost in a burst of frustrated yelling when the batter from the Sox struck out again. When the noise lowered to a murmur of discontent, Liam repeated his question.

“You’re really doing it? You’re sitting in Swifty’s wearing that stupid hat?” Crusher was nearly giddy with laughter.

“I lost the bet, I’m wearing the damn hat.”

“And shirt?”

“Yes,” he ground out.

“Want to make another bet? We could add chaps if you lose again.”

Liam checked the score on the screen. Texas 7. Boston 0. “No,” he grumbled. “You’ve made your point. Hurry up and get here so I can leave.”

After another burst of ear-grinding snickering, he replied, “Can’t make it.”

The waitress slid up to the table, set down Liam’s beer with a gentle but firm thump, smiled, and then slowly fell back, keeping her gaze connected with his until she nearly fell over backward when she bumped into a table. Still leering, she spun around and headed back to the bar, swishing her hips as she went.

Liam would’ve laughed, if he weren’t feeling so stupid. As it was, he was in no mood to laugh. “What do you mean, you can’t make it?”

“Got something going on with Natalie.”

Liam softened at the mention of his brother’s new girlfriend. She was a keeper, as far as he--and the rest of their very close family--was concerned. And it looked like she and Crusher were getting serious, which was a good thing.

But still--

“I know. You think I’m an ass. So, we’ll make a deal. According to the bet you had to sit there until the end of the game. Since I’m not coming, you can leave.” He paused for effect, then added, “You’re off the hook. You have my permission to leave the bar.”

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

“For fucks sake, I--”

“You miss me. I know. I’ll make it up to you, I promise, so--”

While his brother was still babbling, Liam snapped his phone shut and slipped it back into his pocket. He leaned forward, dropped the legs of the chair to the floor, getting ready to leave until a sudden burst of excited shouting stopped him. A square shouldered old man was smacking palms with a wide-eyed college kid while a trio at the end of the bar started pounding on the counter, yelling, “Head for home! Run!”

Liam reached for the fresh beer, figuring he may as well drink it and see if his team could manage to climb out of the slump they’d fallen into. But all intentions of watching the game skittered from his mind when he spotted a woman make her way into the bar.

A skimpy white tank top that curved around a pin-up worthy rack, long legs and a short, floral skirt so light that a gentle gust of wind could easily blow it up far enough to reveal a lacy pair of panties. Or even better, a thong. When she pushed back the long curls that cascaded down her back, she revealed delicate bone structure and lips that looked full, even from a distance.

Full and begging to be kissed.

Even though the Sox were still pinned to the ropes with no hopes of breaking free, at least half of the men pulled their desperate faces away from the game and turned her way, appreciating the way the soft waves of her hair lie across her tight breasts.

She didn’t even glance at the men seated nearby at the bar as she chatted with the redheaded waitress, so she probably wasn’t looking for someone. Not anyone in particular anyway.

As she dug through her purse, tension seemed to cling to her stiff shoulders and that firm set of her jaw--she was not a woman in the mood for games. Baseball or otherwise.

Too bad.

Liam was recently single and more than ready to hook up with a hot piece of ass. Someone to erase the nagging memories of his high-maintenance, always-made-him-beg-for-it girlfriend, Fiona.

Correction.

Ex-girlfriend.

Brooke Miller stared at the liquor-lined shelves of the smoky, Harvard Square bar. No chance of running into anyone she knew. All her friends hung out in Kenmore Square and art gallery openings.

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

Sure, she'd promised herself that she would do something risky and spontaneous before her twenty-fifth birthday, but that didn't mean she had to do it stone sober. A shot or two--maybe three--would only add to the sense of fun. Right?

Well, maybe it would if she thought risky, spontaneous things were fun then it probably would. Until that day arrived, she'd have to settle for the truth. The shots were required to get past the stark fear she had for doing anything out of the ordinary. The new step-by-step self-help program for artists she was following decreed week seven, the week she'd been on for six days now, to be the week when she broke all her own rules and did something completely, utterly, amazingly out-of-character.

Picking up a man in a bar was about as out of character as she could get.

Sad.

But true.

"Here to watch the game?" the redhead behind the bar asked as she set down the beer Brooke had ordered.

Game?

"Um, no. I guess not. Who's playing?"

"The way they've been playing lately, only the true die-hards still come out to watch the games." The waitress gestured over Brooke's shoulder. "You and the cowboy over there are probably the only two people in here who aren't die-hard fans."

Brooke followed the wave of the other woman's arm until she spotted the lone man, gripping a long neck bottle in front of him. The shadow from his wide-rimmed hat was so wide, she couldn't see his face clearly, but when he angled his head back to take a drink, the corded muscles of his neck rippled. If his neck moved that well, what about the rest of him? Her gaze skimmed across the strong width of his shoulders and rolled down across what was probably a very flat set of abs.

"Look at that hat," the waitress murmured, leaning closer. "I don't think he's from around here."

Brooke let her gaze linger, admiring the thick muscles of his forearms and the promising bulge of his huge biceps. He sure wasn't built like any of the rodeo cowboys she'd seen on ESPN. Those guys were wiry and lean. This hunk of muscle...

"If I weren't at work..."

The waitress didn't have to finish the thought out loud. That was a man built for riding--and not just horses. Damn. She'd never have the nerve to go after a man like that.

"He seems to be watching the game," Brooke said, "You sure he's not from around here?"

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

“That hat says it all.”

Brooke twisted her mouth thoughtfully.

“I talked to him, no accent, but that doesn’t really mean anything. My cousin has some friends for Austin, and they don’t have accents.”

“He doesn’t have one either?”

“Didn’t seem to.” The woman behind the bar leaned back and grinned. “You looking for some short-term fun?”

Brooke left the question unanswered as she pulled her gaze away from the man.

“Can you get me two shots of Tequila, please?”

The redhead grinned, laughing as she grabbed a shot glass.

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

Chapter Two

Still warm from throwing back the two shots, Brooke watched the cowboy out of the corner of her eye. For an out of town guy, he sure seemed interested in the baseball game. But he didn't seem to be waiting for anyone.

She'd already looked over the rest of the crowd. Locals, intellectual college boys, a couple high school kids who looked like they'd followed their dad into the bar, and some bored looking girlfriends. The waitress was right, except for the uninterested girls, they were die-hard Sox fans intent on shouting until the team turned their losing streak around.

Brooke pushed aside her third shot glass and took a sip of beer and started picking at the label.

Stop stalling.

She checked the display on her phone.

In less than five hours the week would be up. If she didn't do something risky, spontaneous, and out-of-character in the next few hours--not only would she be breaking a promise she'd made to herself, she'd be falling behind in her artistic self help plan.

For someone about to open an art gallery, falling behind on the self-help plan was worse than breaking a promise to herself. Each new selection she'd made for another artist, reminded her of all her own pieces she had hiding in her studio. Pieces she was too afraid to hang out there for others to see.

Douglas's mocking words rolled through the back of her mind.

Face it, you'll always be a bridesmaid and never a bride.

Why had she wasted so much time trying to develop a relationship with someone like him?

When the game announcer reminded fans that the Sox only had two more innings to score, the rowdy crowd at the bar started throwing peanuts at the screen until the bartender threatened to turn off the game. Time was definitely running out. Brooke had had enough personal disappointments in the past six months--getting dumped by that asshole was just the beginning--so even though her new art gallery was about to open in

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

only a week, she didn't have space on her list of personal disappointments for another item.

Brooke ruled out every last guy at the bar. That left the lone cowboy who kept drawing her gaze.

Maybe she'd just flirt with him. That was out of the ordinary...

Brooke grabbed her long neck, took another sip, and then spun the bottle, watching the golden beer twirl inside. The amber liquid sloshed inside, just like her self-doubts and anxiety--her two best friends.

Two friends she really needed to cut lose.

"Not a Sox fan?"

Brooke flipped around, her gaze connecting with a brilliant pair of blue eyes with tiny flecks of darker blue, and long, dark lashes pretty enough to belong to a woman. But that steady, powerful gaze--that was all male.

"That's probably a good thing, not being a Sox fan, considering the season they're having."

Her gaze dropped to the full smile--also strong and captivating--then circled his rugged face made even more handsome by his afternoon stubble.

It wasn't until then that she spotted the wide brimmed hat.

The cowboy.

When she blinked in surprise, he touched the edge of the brim, fingering the brim.

"Not many people around here wear those," she said, "but... um..." Her words drifted off as she noticed the tiny rose buds creeping across his Western style shirt.

"Don't see shirts like this either, I don't imagine."

She tapped one of the tiny pearl buttons, planning on making a silly joke, but when she felt the rock hard muscle beneath the fabric, she faltered, finally, until she managed a lame, "No."

Instead of lowering her hand, she lingered, intrigued by the heat of his chest.

"I thought maybe it was the outfit you'd been staring at."

"Oh, I wasn't sta--"

He grinned. "You think my vision is messed up cause I have bright sun in my eyes all day?"

At least she had a believable excuse, other than 'yes, I was staring because you have *fuck me* written all over you.' "Okay. I guess was staring."

"You guess." Still grinning, he glanced down at the rosebuds. "Because of the flowered shirt."

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

“No, the shirt...” Brooke laughed at the friendly distress on his face. “You don’t look like you’re from around here.”

“I guess that’s true.” He tipped his hat back and looked across at the unhappy fans huddled around their beer mugs, then came back to her with a smile. “You sticking around to watch the end of the game?”

Had Fate made things easy on her by delivering her a man?

Was it possible her life was starting to turn around?

If she’d have spent more time hanging out in bars instead of museums, then maybe she’d know for sure if he was coming on to her. With only her desire to take a leap away from herself, she couldn’t seem to decide what to do next.

He reached out and touched the bottom of her chin, turning her face to his and igniting a sizzle of electricity that zigzagged all the way to her navel. “That’s why I asked if you were a Sox fan. I’d never pull a diehard fan away from their team.”

The heated sensation lingered even after he lowered his hand. “No, I--I’m not a fan at all.”

He angled his head and studied her with thoughtful blue eyes. “You come here to meet someone?”

Suddenly tingling with energy, Brooke found herself wiggling on her stool. “No, not that either.”

A crooked smile creased his face as he glanced at her row of empty shot glasses. “You just stopped by for a couple shots and a beer?”

“Guess so,” she replied with a shrug.

You look like you’re just about done with that beer,” he said, pointing to the bottle in her hand.

Was that an unspoken suggestion or promise swimming in his blue gaze?

Still looking deep into her eyes, he moved closer, pressing into her with the heat of his body. Electricity danced across her skin, making her feel so alive, so desperate, she could hardly believe she was still in Cambridge.

So this is what its like to flirt with guys in bars? What the hell was wrong with her? She really should have tried it before. Grinning, she said, “What’s it to you?”

He moved closer, so close their bodies were almost touching. Anticipation made her pussy swell with heat. What would it feel like to have him deep inside her?

A knowing grin pulled on his mouth. “I’m ready to walk you to your car.”

Settling into the sexual power she never knew she had, she returned his smile. “You’re not very patient are you?”

“No. I’m not.”

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

She let her gaze slide across him, taking her time to admire each solid, flower-covered inch. "I thought cowboys were relaxed and easy going?"

He shoved one hand into the pocket of his faded jeans and shifted his booted foot, forcing his hips forward, forcing her to notice the prominent bulge under his zipper. "Do I look relaxed and easy going?"

His words were light and teasing, but his intent was clear.

Keeping her gaze connected to his, she gradually raised the beer to her mouth, took a sip, then asked, "Did you used to push your way to the front of the lunch line?"

"Didn't have to." He lifted one booted foot and winked. "I'm fast on my feet."

Instead of replying, Brooke took another drink, working her way to the end of the bottle, waiting to see what he'd say next.

He surprised her by not saying anything. He simply loomed over her, watching and staring at the bottle in her hands, studying the way her fingers curved around the cool, round glass.

"Redecorating your house?"

She looked at her hands, spreading her fingers, so the dim bar light caught the rainbow of flecks dotting her fingers and short battered nails. How Douglas had complained about her "trashy-looking" hands. She swallowed, holding back the truth, offering a vague, "I've been doing some... painting."

"You like doing things with your hands?" he asked, skimming his fingertip over the inside of her wrist. The glimmer in his eyes was friendly curiosity, but the heat of his touch was purely sexual.

What a combination. "Is that a line?"

"What do you think?" his grin widened.

"If it is, you need to work harder. City girls like me have heard it all."

He reached forward, lifting her easily from the bar stool. Once she was settled on her heels, he grabbed her belt loops and pulled her forward. "Guess words aren't going to work then."

Was it wrong to take advantage of a lonesome, out-of-town cowboy? But it wasn't like she was forcing him to stay and entertain her. He was a big boy--and could walk away anytime he chose. Brooke cast aside all self-doubts and readied herself for some completely out-of-character, over-the-top fun.

She swallowed the last of her beer, set the empty bottle on the bar, and shook her head with a soft smile, giving him a challenging look that said, *make something happen, cowboy--or I'm going home.*

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

Was she the type of woman who didn't care about any of the niceties--like the truth that he wasn't an out-of-town cowboy or even the fact that they hadn't exchanged names? Liam looked into her eyes, wondering if he'd find an icy, emotionless depth, but saw something real. And warm. It was looking like this wanton sex kitten was a sheep in wolf's clothing.

"You do this sort of thing often?" he asked.

She pulled in her bottom lip, wetting it with her tongue then pressing her teeth firmly against the sweet soft flesh. When she lowered her lashes playfully, she looked anything but demur and gentle.

Okay. So she wanted to play.

He held in a grin--the flowered shirt--who could blame her for thinking he was some helpless, country boy? Although she should know that a man with a cock bulging like his was not going to be easy to handle.

Still holding her belt loops, he moved her closer, grinning at the sight of her nipples brushing against the delicate roses of his shirt. He took her hand and flattened her palm across his erection, pressing hard enough to let her feel his stiff and ready cock.

Her eyes widened, but to her credit she didn't pull back. Instead, she moved forward cupping as much of him as she could, her sweet mouth dropping open as she applied pressure, making him swell even more.

His gaze zeroed in on her mouth, wondering if she could take the full-length of his shaft.

"I can," she murmured, a confident smile slanting across her mouth. "Whatever you want, that is." She stepped forward, intentionally rubbing one of her nipples across the rough stitching of his shirt. "As long as you're willing to return the favor."

Liam had had a lot of women come on to him, but never in such direct terms. And it had been a long time since he'd been so horny in public. Not since he'd been following his brother around at college parties.

College parties. That gave him an idea.

He grabbed her hand and pulled her through the bar.

Outside, he wrapped his arm around her shoulders and headed for the bank of Charles River, hoping more and more with each stride that the old storehouse was still there.

Chapter Three

Liam felt the river-cooled air about the time they reached Memorial Drive. After he guided her across the street, he spotted the old row house, still there. By the time he pulled her up to the side of the weather battered storage shed, they were both breathing hard. Her from running alongside him in those sexy heels, and him because all of his blood had pooled in his groin. His cock, actually.

Standing close to the door, he gave it firm jab with his elbow. The gleaming latch squeaked, but didn't break. He slammed against it again, nothing. The third time, the screws gave up and the door swung open with a dull thud.

He grabbed her arm, pulled her in, and kicked the door shut.

Rays of street light cut through the uneven slats of the walls, giving them just enough light to see each other. In her eyes, he saw the last thing he expected.

Hesitation.

Ever since she'd cupped his cock, he'd been thinking about two things. Her mouth gliding across his skin and pounding into her pussy until she whimpered, begging for release. But he understood her pause.

What they were doing was not a *good idea*, but damn, it all felt so completely right. Stop? Impossible.

Ignoring his jab of conscience, he distracted her with his first outright lie of the night. "I saw this place from the road."

She glanced over, then stepped away, taking in the rows of skiffs and ropes hanging from the rough walls, her hands pulling on the edge of her skirt.

Nerves?

Or maybe she was simply considering.

The wind carried shouting and music from parties, the sound small by the time it reached the storage shed, but still a reminder of the outside world. An outside world Liam did not want to think about.

And he didn't want her to start thinking about either.

Thinking led to questions, and questions led to answers. Answers came in two forms--yes and no.

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

And he was all about yes.

Liam pushed the door shut, then to keep the wind from blowing it open, slid a heavy wood crate against it.

He reached her in two steps, and shoved his hands under that flirty skirt to cup her firm, bare ass. Not completely bare, he noted as his fingertips brushed across the smooth strip of lace of the thong that ran between her cheeks.

She sighed as he grabbed her, instinctively spreading her legs and lifting her face to look him in the eye. The hesitation was gone. In its place was confident certainty.

After wiggling out of his grasp, she stepped out of her sandals, set them by the door. Then, she took hold of the bottom edge of her tank top and peeled it up.

The simple movement was nothing like the experienced Combat Zone strippers. Those women made a living of dragging out the littlest detail, enticing the men to wait--and spend. This woman's movements were efficient, matter-of-fact, and sexy as hell. Like she knew what she wanted, knew what he wanted, and was ready to go after it.

She set her shirt on a bench near her sandals, then turned to him, watching his reaction as his gaze fixed on the swells of her breasts and the white lace of her low-cut bra.

"Is this what you had in mind?" she asked, stepping forward with sharp steps that made her breasts bounce.

Liam wanted to speak, to agree, but his throat had gone dry.

The rays of light that sliced through the cracks in the siding skimmed across her smooth skin, inciting him to touch, and making him wonder how she would react if he tasted her nipples.

Arching her back and lifting the hem of her skirt just enough for him to see the top of her thighs, she murmured, "Are you as big as you think you are?"

Liam didn't need to be asked twice.

He flipped open the rivet of his jeans and carefully glided the zipper down, easing it slowly across the arch of his erection. The careful heat of her gaze followed each tiny movement of his hands, not missing any detail.

When he put his fingertips at the top of his briefs, ready to pull them down, she put her hands across his. "Wait. Let me."

Moving her hands to his shoulders, she backed him to the wall and then curved his fingers around the railing that circled the interior of the shed. Once she was satisfied that he was firmly anchored, she knelt before him, pulling down the band of his briefs as she settled herself near his booted feet.

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

He expected her to tug down the band and free his straining rod, but instead she lightly trailed her fingertips down the fine line of hair that ran down his center. She glanced up, offering him a teasing smile, then scooted closer and set her mouth just below his navel. Her sweet ass wiggled side to side each time she touched her mouth to him and the sides of her bra brushed against his skin as she moved lower.

The heat of her light kisses burned through him, making his heart pound and his pulse thrum. As he focused on her gentle, slow movements, the muscles of his thighs tensed, making his need for release painfully urgent. Her slow approach was not what he'd expected, and somehow that made it even more of a turn on. A shock, considering he was an impatient man. On all counts. Sex included.

With each tiny movement of her soft lips, the need to drive his cock into her hot, wet pussy strung him tighter and tighter. Thank God he was experienced enough not to lose control and come right then and there.

Still, just to be sure, he lifted his gaze from the round curves of her breasts and stared at the boring, weather beaten wall in front of him. *Listen to the hushed hum of the evening traffic.*

As though she knew he was trying to avoid looking at her, she rocked back onto her heels, commanding his attention as she spoke to him by sliding her fingers under the band of his briefs. "All that outside work does good things for you."

Liam opened his mouth to reply, but just as he did, she reached inside and took his cock into her hands. Her palms were rough, her fingers strong and capable. She wrapped the fingers of one hand around his throbbing shaft and pulled his briefs down with the other.

"You're even bigger than I expected," she said on a sigh, caressing the tip of his head first with her finger and then with the tip of her tongue.

The embarrassment of wearing the sissy flowered shirt was long gone. Liam couldn't ever remember ever feeling so strong and masculine as he did right then, with a sexy, beautiful woman at his feet, marveling at his pulsing hard erection.

Her tongue was gentle, yet demanding, and soon she was sliding his shaft into her mouth with delicate precision.

She took more of him until his tip bumped against the back of her throat.

He groaned and thrust forward, tightening his grip on the railing to keep his balance. "If you keep doing that, I'm not going to get a chance to fuck you."

Laughing lightly, she drew back completely from his jutting dick and looked up from under her lashes. "And that would be a shame."

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

She turned her attention back to his throbbing penis, but he was done letting her take the lead. Hauling her to her feet, Liam covered her mouth with his. She welcomed his kiss, responding to his silent request for more by angling her head back and allowing him full access to the sweet warmth of her willing mouth. The instant connection was intense and more than just physical.

After months of having to nearly beg for sex from Fiona, this woman's eager acceptance was a balm to his wounded pride. He moved his hands up and spread his fingers wide, holding her ribcage firmly in his palms, but she wasn't content to remain still. Keeping her mouth pressed close, she wiggled against him, twisting side to side until her skirt was bunched up around her legs.

With each sway of her hips, she ground her pelvis against him, bumping into his jutting erection and working it between her legs. The tiny triangle of lace was the only thing keeping him from thrusting into her wet, willing pussy.

When Liam flicked his tongue into her mouth, mimicking the movement in his mind, she whimpered and reached down to tug at her panties. After lifting one leg to let the bit of lace fall to the dirt floor, she brushed her furry mound against the tip of his shaft.

Instant flames.

Nearly panting, he broke away from her mouth. "Hold on honey, we need some..."

For a split second he mistook the daze in her eyes for confusion, but when she blinked, he realized it wasn't confusion at all.

It was lust.

His eyes must have been swimming with it too.

Thanks to Fiona, who couldn't be bothered to take care of contraception, Liam had gotten into the habit of carrying condoms. He hated to break contact with the woman in his arms, even for a second, but he had to retrieve one of the packets from his wallet. Even in the darkness, he had no trouble finding it. As he unwrapped it, she reached out and stroked his thigh. It was as though she was as reluctant as he to be apart for even a few seconds.

His swollen shaft was so stiff, the condom went on quickly, within seconds he had her back in his arms, and she was wiggling against him again, sliding her eager hands under his shirt.

One of her bras straps had fallen down and Liam spotted her pebbled nipple peeking beneath strands of long, dark hair. When he lowered his head to take the tip into

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

his mouth, the hat brim caught on her shoulder. With a curse, he knocked the damn thing off, not bothering to see where it landed.

He pushed her bra out of the way and took her breast into his mouth. She moaned and arched back, encouraging him to take whatever he wanted. Her generosity stunned him, and he lifted his head to look into her warm brown eyes. "Before we, I... What's your name?"

She smiled, the expression open and honest. "Brooke. And what about you, cowboy?"

"Liam."

She blinked, and for a horrible instant he thought she might back away and ask why his name wasn't Hank or Cutter, or whatever real cowboys were called.

"Liam. It suits you. Strong, but gentle."

And with that, she wrapped one of her legs around his ass and guided his penis inside her.

Her pussy was tight, slick, and welcoming.

Perfect.

But without something to brace against, he couldn't thrust into her without knocking them over. Holding Brooke's hips in one hand, and cradling her back against his forearm, he backed her against the spot in the wall where he'd been. She reached one hand back to grab the railing while holding onto his shoulder with the other.

Taking full advantage of the support of the wall, Liam angled his hips back until only the tip of his cock brushed against her clit, then thrust in.

The first three strokes, he held back, afraid he might hurt her, but when she whimpered and bucked against him, encouraging him by whispering, "Fuck me hard," into his ear, he let go of his restraint and pounded into her.

"More, harder," she said, then added, "I want to feel your cock inside me."

Liam had been inside a lot of women, probably more than he'd want to admit, but he'd never had a woman talk to him that way. So direct and clear. The words weren't a game to her, a way to get him horny; they were a request--a desperate plea.

And he was more than happy to grant it.

He caught his breath, then said, "Hold onto the rail."

Once she had both hands on the rail, he reached behind his back to steady her leg. Holding her calf in his palm, he drove into her with thrusts that were both long and quick, gliding his cock out of her pussy to brush her swollen clit with the tip of his shaft, and then driving all of himself into her.

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

The rasp of her breath caressed his ear, encouraging him to continue pounding into her eager cunt. Soon she tensed with the first waves of her release. Panting, she clung to the railing, matching his strokes with sharp thrusts of her hips.

Liam drove on, only letting his control go when she began to sag against him. He sucked in a gulp of air as the initial jerk of his climax released the first pulse of come. As the pulses became stronger, his mind went blank, and he gave himself over to the all consuming need to pound into her tight center and possess her completely.

“Damn girl,” he mumbled on a groan once he’d caught his breath. Rolling the condom off his cock which was still partially erect, he asked, “You do this to every guy you set your sights on?”

He’d meant the question to be light, but a cloud passed through her eyes.

Regret?

A woman who went after what she wanted the way she did couldn’t have many regrets in life.

Self-doubt?

If that was the case, he could get rid of that problem easy enough. He kissed her softly on the lips and smiled. “I loved fucking you.”

A slow smile brought light back to her face. She grinned and smoothed the wild locks out of her eyes. “You like riding me, cowboy?”

He was happy to tell her the absolute truth. “Yes, Ma’am.”

She reached behind her back to unzip her skirt and let it fall. Then she unhooked her twisted bra, freeing her breasts. Naked, she strode over to where his hat had fallen, picked it up, plopped it on her head with a crooked, sassy grin.

He’d never look at another cowboy hat without remembering her that way.

“May I have your shirt, please?” she asked, holding out one upturned palm.

How could he turn down a naked woman?

She laid the rose covered monstrosity across the ground and lowered herself onto it, spreading her legs wide enough for him to see the shadows of her slick, throbbing pussy. “That’s a good thing that you liked fucking me. Cause you’re going to do it again. Right now.”

She arched her back and rocked side to side, making her breasts bounce playfully. “Looks like you’re ready. Mount up.”

She was right. His dick was already stiff.

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

Brooke's eyes skimmed across Liam's tanned chest and then moved to admire his powerful forearms. If only she could see him in action. Roping horses or hauling feed sacks.

Damn, that had to be a sight.

Sure, the night had started out as a personal challenge, but she'd met and matched that the moment she took her clothes off in front of him. It's what happened after that that'd changed her. She'd uncovered a side of herself she'd had no idea existed.

Sexy, demanding, confident.

With that thought boosting her determination to live this fantasy out to the fullest, she reached up and caressed her left breast. Gazing directly into his blue eyes, she squeezed the nipple until it peaked tightly, sending quick jolts of heat to her already over heated center.

She lowered her gaze to his rising cock and grinned. It was as hard as it'd been when she wrapped her leg around him and guided him into her.

Obviously, he wanted her as much as she wanted him.

Maybe he needed a little encouragement. She flipped over onto her hands and knees, asking over her shoulder with a tiny bit of taunt in her voice, "You do have another rubber, don't you?"

Female satisfaction coursed through her when his mouth dropped open and his gaze zeroed in on her ass. She wiggled side to side, and then spread her legs, ready to tease him some more, but he was busy digging through his wallet for another condom. He sheathed himself faster than she would've thought possible.

He set his palms on her ass cheeks as he went down on his knees. "Oh honey," he murmured, caressing the round curves of her backside, squeezing her already sensitive flesh.

Anxious to feel him inside her again, she spread her knees wider and lowered her back, exposing more of her sex.

"I know, sweetheart," he said, rubbing his dick along the inside of her quivering thigh. "But there's no reason to rush."

She wasn't content to wait. "Now, Liam. Now," she replied, scooting back and forcing their bodies to touch.

Still holding her ass, he impaled her with one strong thrust. He filled her so completely, so fully, for the briefest second she wondered why she'd never felt so completely satisfied.

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

But he quickened his pace, riding her with hard, constant swings and all her conscious thoughts scattered. She gave herself over to carnal desire and let herself be guided by instinct and want.

The waves of pleasure came hard and fast, tearing through her with unexpected, ferocious intensity. As his own climax came on the heels of hers, he groaned and pounded against her with focused determination.

After he finally relaxed, and his breathing started to slow, he placed a light kiss of the small of her back. The delicate gesture nearly brought tears to her eyes. But she silently chided herself for being so sappy and sentimental, blaming her reaction on the intense and fantastic sex.

So what if she'd never see him again. It wasn't like they had some real connection. Great sex, that's *all* it was.

She pushed herself to her feet, grabbing her clothes and pulling them on. He was doing the same, returning the world to normal by covering their tired bodies as though that mind-blowing, intimate exchange never occurred.

"I'll walk you back to your car," he said over his shoulder as he zipped up his jeans.

Even though he was still right there beside her, Brooke felt herself drifting away from him. Maybe she just didn't want to prolong the inevitable goodbye. "No, that's okay. I took the T."

Shaking out his flowered shirt, he said. "Okay, I'll walk you to the station."

"You don't have to do that," she replied, stepping into her sandals. With the rush of desire sated, the real world pressed in, and she noticed the rush of nearby traffic for the first time.

"I know, I don't *have* to." He dropped his hat on top of her head, smiling. "But I *want* to. And since this seems to be my night for getting what I want..."

Stubbornness lingered in his blue eyes, so she figured there was no point in arguing. Now that her suddenly crazy sex drive had calmed down a bit, she was feeling out of sorts and probably couldn't pull off an argument anyway. "Okay, thanks."

Once they were both dressed, he took her hand and led her from the riverside storage shed. As they walked away, she was tempted to take one last glance at the building, but she didn't. No need, really. She'd never forget it.

Once they'd crossed the street, he took her hand and said, "Tell me something about yourself."

Trying to cover up the confusion pulling on her heart, she shrugged. "Nothing to tell, really."

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

“Okay, how about what do you do for a living?”

No harm in telling him, she’d never see him again. “I’m an artist.”

Her shoulder bumped into him when he came to a stop on the sidewalk. “An artist? Really?”

“It’s not a big deal.” She started walking, pulling him around the corner at the cemetery. “I do print work and some painting.”

“What are you working on right now?”

“I just finished a series of sunflower prints. I used a lot of wood blocks, for texture. Holding out the hand that wasn’t tucked into his, she added. “That’s why my hands look so terrible.”

“I think they look great.” To add emphasis to the comment, he lifted her hand up and kissed her fingers. She smiled, until he asked a question she couldn’t answer. “Where can I go to see your stuff?”

Eventually she replied, “Nowhere, I’m not ready for that. I--I don’t think it’s what people are interested in.”

“How do you know if it isn’t up somewhere for people to see?”

His tone wasn’t condescending, like Douglas’s had been. Just...curious. “I’m patient. I can wait until the time is right. Know what I mean?”

“Do I know about patience?” He laughed. “Not at all.”

They walked the rest of the way to the T in silence. Once they reached the entrance to the station, he kissed her lightly, whispered goodbye, then disappeared into the Cambridge crowd.

It wasn’t until she reached the lower platform that Brooke realized she was still wearing his hat.

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

Chapter Four

"I still think you should go look for her. *If* it was as hot as you say..."

Liam cut Nikolai off with a dark look.

"Okay," the foreman crossed his stout arms across his square chest. "She *was* as hot as you say. So, I'm back to saying, you need to go find her. Else you're going to drive us all crazy with your sour moods."

"I told you, she thought I was some out-of-town cowboy." He scowled. "What kind of asshole dresses up like a cowboy, then lies to the woman he meets?"

"You could explain." Nikolai hopped down from the half wall he'd been sitting on and headed for the stairs. "You'd work it out."

"What am I going to do, walk the streets of Cambridge until I spot her?" Liam called to his back.

Nikolai's laughter echoed off the stone marble steps. "It'd be better for us all if you did," he called from the bottom just before he ducked outside for his break.

Liam cursed. He never should have told Nikolai about Brooke. But something about her was so different, he'd rambled on about how she made him *feel*, acting like a smitten idiot.

All over someone he'd only just met and would never see again.

She was someone, but not just anyone.

Damn she was hot.

He could live another thirty years and never be with a woman like her. But it was more than just her, he knew. It was *them*. The two of them together. It was right. Not right for the minute right, but plain right. As in, could be right like that again.

Hell.

He was getting another boner just thinking about her hot pussy--and the way she'd tempted him by wiggling her ass in his face. Going to the can to jack off again was out of the question. His crew was bound to notice. If they hadn't already.

Shit.

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

Liam turned away from the stairs and crossed the wide room to look out one of the huge plate glass windows. Maybe Nikolai was right. Maybe he should go look for her.

Then they could--

His cock started to stiffen again. He groaned and focused his attention on the view below.

Stare at the cars.

Stare at the sidewalk. Listen to roar of the power tools.

Think about anything except Brooke.

Brooke paused, lingering on the sidewalk to admire the front of the gorgeous, new building. The real thing looked even better than the renderings. The structure was an artful mixture of old and new--modern US efficiency with colonial charm. Plenty of huge glass windows and gleaming copper accents that would eventually turn green with a patina that would help the building blend in with the rest of downtown Boston.

Crusher, the guy who owned the demolition company that had torn down the lovely, but unfixable, building that had been there before and had promised she'd love it. He'd been so convincing that she signed the lease sight unseen.

And if the outside looked this fantastic, she dug the shiny new keys out of her pocket and grinned, the inside was going to be amazing.

If it was finished.

The last she'd heard, there'd been a problem with the drywall delivery because of rebuilding in the south due to storms, and everything was on hold until the shipment came through. All things considered, that was not what she wanted to hear. Or even consider. But the reputation of the builder was excellent, and everyone had been assuring her that her gallery would be ready on time.

The invitations to her opening had gone out two weeks ago, the catering had been arranged, and her garage was crowded with paintings, prints and sculptures artists from all over the Boston area. If her new gallery wasn't ready on time...

Think positive. Don't expect the worst.

In spite of her worries, Brooke grinned. Cutting Douglas out of her life had been the first step in the right direction toward positive thinking. Look how the rest of that evening had ended.

Yum.

That was the type of hot sex fantasies were made of. If it weren't for the black cowboy hat hanging on her bedpost, she might think she'd conjured up the whole thing.

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

She slipped the key into the lock, and started to pull open the door, but it swung open, nearly knocking her off balance. Still teetering on her platform sandals, she righted herself by grabbing the railing. The railing kept her from falling flat on her face, but her shoulder bag slipped off and hit the pavement with a smack.

A balding man in brown shorts and a baggy, white t-shirt picked up her bag and held it out for her. "Oh, hey. Sorry. You okay?"

After she assured him she was, and thanking him for picking up her bag, she asked him who she could talk to about the status of the building. "How's the progress with the drywall going?" she added to clarify.

"Drywall's up," the man replied with a sigh. "The guy's have been up all night sanding."

"Great!"

"Yeah," the man glanced over his shoulder, then added, "The guys weren't too happy about stayin' up half the night. But the art gallery owner sent the boys invitations to some fancy opening, and the wives and girlfriends heard about it, and well...the guys have been doing what they have to do—even though they weren't too happy about it."

Brooke laughed.

"Oh." The man's eyebrows shot up, suddenly realizing he might have said the wrong thing to the wrong person. "You're one of the gallery people?"

She stretched out her arm, offering her hand. "Brooke Miller."

"*Brooke?*" The man's eyes widened as he accepted her gesture and shook her hand. "*You're* Miller Gal-- I mean, the owner of Miller Gallery? Your name's really Brooke?"

Obviously, judging from the sudden glee on his weathered face, she was missing something. "Yep. That's me."

"Li--I mean the boss--he's inside. Right inside." He stepped back held the door wide open for her. "Why don't you go on in? The last time I saw him he was on the second floor, right at the top of the stairs. I bet he's still there."

Brooke started inside, but the man stopped her by setting his hand on her arm.

"What I said about the guys...they weren't that upset, I--"

"It's okay. I understand, and I'm glad they're excited about the opening. I'll be looking forward to seeing them."

He ran a hand over his bald head, smiling wider. "I'll be there, too. We're all looking forward to it."

Brooke smiled her thanks and crossed the threshold.

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

The man seemed a little...excitable. Maybe spending all days with hammers pounding all around did that to people.

Her musings fell away as she paused in the entrance area, taking in the expensive white walls and gorgeous natural lighting. The combination was perfect. High above, rows and rows of halogen lights crept across the ceiling. Even at night the lighting would be exactly what she needed to showcase the art of the local artisans. The wide floor space looked to be more than ample for huge, heavy sculptures and some of the more unusual 3-D pieces.

The ornate staircase that ran up the center of the building featured a middle landing that was big enough for a bar and a couple tables. It was the perfect place for Boston's well-to-do to see and be seen.

Brooke beamed. It was everything she'd hoped it would be and then some. And from the looks of everything, the space would be ready on time. Hoping to find the builder so she could thank him herself, she started up the stairs.

At the top, she spotted a lone man, his wide shoulders silhouetted against the late afternoon skyline visible through the plate glass windows. Dressed in jeans and a red t-shirt, he could have been any guy on the street, yet something about him tugged on the fringes of Brooke's memory.

The click of her sandals snapping on the steps grew louder as she reached the top, and he turned. Their gazes connected, the air whooshed from Brooke's lungs.

He came forward, looking a little different without the cowboy shirt and hat, but moving with the same urgent, impatience she remembered from that night.

Her body responded instantly as he came closer, even her stomach quivered with expectation.

"I--I--" After the way she'd acted with him, she had no idea what to say.

He wasn't smiling, his gaze was steady and searching. As though he thought she'd come for him. Each step he took forward, she moved to the side, unwilling to get too close, afraid she might come unglued all over again.

To hold back the rush of emotions--and embarrassment, she said, "I'm looking for the builder."

He halted, realizing that she hadn't somehow tracked him down and come back for seconds. "The builder?"

"Right." She folded her arms across her chest. "I've rented this space for my gallery and..."

A grin tugged on his mouth, making her remember how his lips felt on her skin. But there in the daylight, awkwardness and uneasiness swarmed around her, reminding

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

her that she'd gotten what she wanted from their adventure—there was no reason for more.

"I can help you with that," he said.

Brooke glanced over her shoulder to be sure they were still alone. "About the other night, I--I didn't think--"

"I know. You thought I was from out of town. I should've said something."

"You live here?" Brooke pulled on her purse strap. "But--but that hat and the..."

"Asinine shirt. I know." He spread his arms wide, making Brooke look at his strong forearms. "See, I lost a bet with my brother and--"

"Hey, boss?"

A workman stood at the top of the stairs, and Liam gave the man his attention. "What's up, Nate?"

"The tilers are here, they say they need to ask you about the grout color or something like that before they can get started."

"Are they downstairs?"

The man nodded, hooking his thumb over his shoulder to point below. "By the back door."

"Okay. Thanks. Tell them I'll be right down."

Brooke watched the workman until he disappeared down the upstairs hall then squared her shoulders.

"Fine, so you're not from out of town. I get that. Okay. You're the builder. Fine. Okay."

Liam's brows pulled down. "It wasn't like that."

"Like what?" she asked, letting her shock turn into anger.

"Like what you're thinking that it--we--that what we did was--"

"What *I* did, Liam. I'm not like that. Not at all. I don't want to talk about it...or... anything." She stepped back, trying unsuccessfully to not look at the way his hips moved as he came forward. "Let's forget it."

He set his hand on her waist, slid his fingers under her light blue top. "Don't look at me like that, like what we did was...wrong."

"It wasn't wrong, it just wasn't me."

"It should be you."

"No." She'd told him too much, about her art. She felt exposed and vulnerable. "It shouldn't."

"Hey, boss?"

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

Liam let go of her and crossed to the top of the stairs, leaning down to call, "I said I'll be down in a minute."

The reply was hesitant and just loud enough to be heard over the constant hum of power tools. "Sorry, man."

Liam strode to Brooke, reaching out and pulling her to him until the heat of their bodies fused. "I'm not about to forget what happened, and I don't think you are either."

She looked away, pretending to be unaffected by his touch. "I already did."

He bent down to brush his cheek against her hair. Even though he didn't touch her physically, his heat was everywhere.

"Fine. We'll talk after the opening."

"You don't need to come to that."

He grinned. "Are you taking back my invitation?"

Brooke sighed, trying to hang onto her tough guy routine, but failing. "No. You can come. But don't expect to talk to me. It's a business thing. Um...one of the things I came to talk about...the landlord made arrangements for you, I meant *your company*, to pick up and deliver the art for the show."

"Right. I remember."

Brooke took out the map to her house and the diagram she'd made of the show. "The art is in my garage, and this shows which pieces go where."

"Yours are going next to the front door, right?"

"No, I'm not hanging mine."

"Why not?"

She held in a frustrated sigh and said the first excuse that came to mind, "My work doesn't suit the rest of the show. Everything I'm hanging is the best of the best."

"If you paint the way you make love..."

"It's not like that, the emotions are so...different," she lied. "Besides," she added softly, "I told you, I'm not like I was the other night."

Shaking his head as he walked away, he murmured, "You're wrong."

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

Chapter Five

After two hours at the salon, Brooke was as ready as she'd ever be for the opening. All afternoon, she'd kept telling herself that her excitement had everything to do with the official opening of her new business and nothing to do with seeing Liam again. It had been two weeks, surely whatever attraction she'd had to him had to have faded.

And besides, that night with Liam was just that--one night. Not something she'd repeat.

Even though she wasn't going to get involved with him—or anyone else who made her act *like that*--she had changed. She could almost see herself showing one of her smaller pieces in the future. If she could find an out of the way location where it wouldn't draw too much attention. But that would be later, after things at the gallery settled down.

Anxious to be sure everything about the evening went perfectly, she flipped open her cell and dialed Nancy's number.

Her assistant answered on the second ring, greeting her with raw music blaring in the background as usual. "Don't worry," she said, spinning the volume down, "I'm going to change it to something *appropriate* before anyone shows up."

Brooke shook some dry food into her cat's bowl. "So nobody has come by yet?"

"It's only five, the invites said six."

Millie strolled across the linoleum, eyeing Brooke skeptically before taking a bite. "The caterers have already been by, right?"

"Yes, of course. Everything is *fine*. I told you I'd call if there was a problem. I haven't called, so that means *no problem*."

"Thanks Nancy," Brooke replied, sliding the cat food box onto the shelf.

"Hey, you sure those construction guys know they're invited?"

"Yes," she picked up the water bowl and carried it to the sink. "I dropped off the invitations myself. Remember, I told you I talked to the foreman."

Brooke could hear the smile in Nancy's voice. "Right. They can't all have girlfriends."

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

"You're crazy, you know that?" she said over the running water.

"You should try it sometime. Does wonders for your outlook on life."

Brooke scowled. "Someone else told me that recently."

"Good advice. You should take it."

Um, let me think. No.

Time to change topics. "How does everything look?"

"Great, I like the changes you made."

She set the bowl in the sink, then leaned against the counter. "Changes?"

"Yeah, downstairs by the door. Who's the new artist?"

A bad feeling settled in the pit of Brooke's stomach. "What exactly are you talking about?"

"Those prints in the retro frames? The set by the doors--they're amazing."

Brooke flipped off the water, asking, "Are the frames white?" But she didn't really listen to Nancy's reply. She already knew.

Bolting from the sink, she rushed through goodbye and snapped her cell shut, grabbed her purse, and flew to her car. Not even the notorious Boston traffic slowed her down. Three red lights later, she was squeezing herself into an illegal parking spot, then jogging down the sidewalk. By the time she reached her door, her expensive blow dry was starting to curl.

But she didn't get there soon enough. The downstairs was already filling up with artists, clients, and potential clients. Clusters of people stood in a circle, staring at her five most recent pieces, the sunflowers, which were hanging front and center, shining brightly under their own row of spot lights. Brooke felt sick, she couldn't bear watching the people as they pointed and exchanged comments.

As coolly as possible, she started greeting guests, all the while keeping a look out for the person to blame for exposing her.

After forty minutes of chatting, she spotted him at the top of the stairs.

"Excuse me," she said to the trio of lawyers she'd convinced to buy a set of watercolors for their lobby, and marched up the marble steps. He'd already disappeared by the time she'd reached the middle landing, so she quickened her steps.

Liam waited behind the corner and grabbed Brooke as soon as she rounded it.

"Damn it, let go of me," she hissed, trying to wiggle out of his grasp. She fought pretty well, but she was absolutely no match for him. He backed her into the unmarked storage closet easily enough.

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

He leaned in, brushing his cheek across her temple as he whispered into her ear. "I had a feeling you weren't going to be happy with me."

"You--"

Her mouth was warm and soft, but only slightly responsive. Nothing at all like she'd been that night, but he wasn't going to give up easily. Liam kept his hold on her waist light, letting her know she was free to come out of his arms if she really wanted to. Yet she stayed put, letting him nudge her jaw up so he could run a trail of kisses down the soft, smooth column of her neck.

He pressed a final kiss on her collarbone. "We're good together."

"You shouldn't have put up my sunflowers." Her voice was small, but urgent.

He'd known she was going to be annoyed, but once he'd seen her art, hidden in the back of her garage, he'd made his mind up in an instant. She had to see things his way. "Everyone loves them," he said, sliding his hand around to the small of her back, caressing her there with his thumb. "They're gorgeous and sexy, like you."

"You--you shouldn't have hung them." Despite her protest, her body was beginning to relax.

He smiled in the darkness. "You already said that."

"Aren't you going to apologize?" she asked, placing her palms flat across his chest.

Was she going to push him away? Even so, he pressed on, anxious to get through to her. "No apology."

She sighed. The breath a mixture of release and frustration. "I told you I was waiting."

Encouraged that she hadn't pushed him away, Liam dipped his fingertips into the waistband of her skirt. "Waiting for what?"

"Until--until..."

"See?" He pulled her closer. "Even you don't know what you were waiting for."

Suddenly she stiffened. "It's not that simple."

"Yes, it is."

But he could tell she was done listening.

Brooke pushed him away and backed toward the door, leaving Liam alone in the closet. Fueled by a fearful mix of emotions, she rushed toward the stairs, anxious to get away. But she stopped short at the top step when she saw Nancy removing the price tag of her largest sunflower print and replacing it with a sold marker. A few yards away from the piece, a couple stood arm in arm, matching smiles lighting their faces.

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

Brooke swallowed hard, working to accept the wonderful truth.
She'd sold her first piece.

Pride flashed through her, followed by the complete thrill of knowing—someone—two people actually—understand her vision.

Brooke couldn't pull her gaze away from that tiny sold sign. To her, it was a huge stamp of approval. A vote of confidence.

The first wave of stunned awe was giving way to giddy excitement. A burst of laughter welled up inside her, as she backed away from the steps. The last thing she needed was to burst out laughing, looking like a giddy idiot in front of everyone.

But standing there alone was horrible, with no one to share her excitement with—Liam! He'd understood her vision too.

It took all the control Brooke possessed to *not* run back to the closet. She managed to walk, very quickly, instead.

When she pulled the door open, he was still standing there, in the near dark, with a sexy smirk on his tantalizing mouth. She wanted to shout with joy, but as soon as their gazes connected, and she saw the confidence in his gaze, doubts crept in. "You didn't have anything to do with someone buying my art, did you?"

His blue eyes flashed. "Someone bought something? Already?"

"You didn't--"

"No!" He shook his head, sincerity clearing his eyes. "All I did was hang it. Honest."

Liam grabbed her, pulled her in, and reached around to shut the door. "I told you we're good together," he said, taking her into his arms and pressing his already erect cock against her. This time, instead of holding back, she wiggled closer, rekindling that hot, sexy, confident woman she'd been the other night.

She didn't even try to hold back her smile as she teased him with a mock protest. "We don't even know each other."

"So," he replied, sliding his hands under her skirt. "Later, you can ask me all the questions you want."

Leaning back, she added, "I have to get back downstairs. People are going to wonder where I've been."

He held tight to her waist, kissed her solidly on the lips, then said, "Five more minutes. Then you can go."

"I want more than five minutes from you, cowboy."

Ignoring her, he unzipped his pants, took her hand and curved her fingers around his shaft. "Five minutes now, all the time you want later. Deal?"

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

Just holding him made her pussy hot. She wanted to run her hands across his chest, his back, his ass... everywhere. She wanted to feel his solid weight on top of her... She wanted *everything*.

“Okay. You’ve got yourself a deal.” She pulled his briefs down while he lifted her skirt up, then thinking of all the places she wanted to touch him added, “On one condition.”

He was already sliding on a condom. “Anything.”

She wrapped one leg behind him and took hold of his shoulders, anxious for his strong, steady strokes, but also not ready to give up on her condition. “Next time, we’re doing this naked and lying down—in a bed.”

Murmuring his agreement in her ear, he slid into her and filled her completely with one thrust. Matching Liam’s rhythm, Brooke angled her hips to increase the pressure on her clit. Within seconds, her climax started, and she gave in to the sudden release, happily knowing that there would be many more next times, plenty of chances to do it slow, lying down, or any other way she wanted.

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

About the Author

Thrill-seeking risk takers, heroes with a dark past, sexy locales, untamed women! Isabelle Drake writes stories featuring men and women who aren't afraid to go after what they want. An avid traveler, she'll go just about anywhere--at least once--to meet people and get story ideas.

Also from Isabelle Drake and Venus Press...

Bad Girls Do It Better, Volume 5: "Something to Prove"

Brigand Love

Sons of Zeus, Fate Unbound

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

NAILED

BY

J.J. MASSA

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

Dedication:

To Sida Pan, future marine biologist, and my inspiration, along with all of those fine, hardworking construction workers out there.

And thank you, Tracey, for all you do.

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

Chapter One

Sida Zhou sipped at her wine; occasionally throwing disgruntled looks at the construction site easily seen from the shaded outdoor table where she was seated. Normally, she was a happy person, always a ready smile. Today, not so much.

Not only was she annoyed, she felt guilty about it. Double whammy's sucked!

All she wanted was to become a marine biologist. That was her dream, her goal. Having achieved her undergraduate degree in biology, with a concentration both in marine sciences and human biology would have, *should* have made that possible. But no, she was a giant weenie. Instead she'd enrolled in the Modular Medical Program--Pre Med.

And on the other side of the street, there it was--the culmination of all her angst: her parents' offices. The construction being done on the trendy medical offices was visible. They'd bought the tiny boutique next door to put in rooms for her. An office of her own, right off the Marketplace, to see patients. A reward for her continuing achievements.

Sida sighed loud and long, the sound at odds with her sunny personality and with the cheerful people sightseeing and sitting around her at the popular Boston bar. *Cheers*. She wasn't at all cheerful.

Glancing over again, she caught sight of *him*, her heart's desire. Terry Lee Darby, or was it Derby? Terry Lee Derby, that was it. Who cared really? Okay, Sida did care, but anyway, the guy was hot, too hot! And apparently he agreed, mopping his face with a limp kerchief. He was hot and aggravated, in fact. She saw him jerk his hard hat off, tossing it away angrily, and scrape his fingers through his short, brownish-blond hair.

He stood still for a second and she couldn't look away. He must've been listening to someone she couldn't see. Suddenly he kicked a board at his feet, but that didn't seem to assuage his anger. As she watched, he jerked his shirt over his head and threw it at the ground, turning away. Her breath caught in her throat.

His back, for the few seconds she'd seen it, had been tanned and sculpted, but his front was a sight to behold. One look at that tight, muscular derriere, and all she wanted was to grab with both hands and hold on. Turning, his lightly furred chest shone like gold

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

with the sun shining on the light hair dusting his pecs. His biceps rippled as he stretched and turned, locking eyes with her.

Sida felt her face flush and she dipped her head. She couldn't believe that beautiful piece of eye candy had caught her looking. And he had, she was sure of it.

It had been bound to happen. She'd been looking at him enough over the last few days--weeks, really. He was...he was a hunk, to put a fine point on it. He was the only thing about her parents' "gift" to her that she was enjoying.

At first, those snapping, caramel-colored eyes appeared angry, she could see it from where she sat. His chiseled jaw was clenched tight. Those full, sensuous lips, pressed in a hard, flat line. And then, she could see him relax.

But suddenly--their eyes locked. Damn! She was sure of it... He was laughing at her! She wanted to growl at him. She saw his lips twitch and knew, if she were closer, she'd see that knowing glint in those so very sexy golden eyes, like warm butterscotch over ice cream--yum--she could happily drown in them.

As if her life wasn't complicated enough right now, the last thing she needed to deal with was an excruciating crush on the man hired to add an office she didn't want to her parents' building. And to say she had a *crush* on him was putting it mildly. The sound of that sexy voice, steeped in the Deep South, was enough to make her forget everything around her. The sight of that gold hair, his tanned, well-muscled body--her pulse rocketed into jackhammer mode just thinking about him.

She looked down into her wine glass and then up again at the waiter who stopped in front of her table. He'd finally remembered that she wanted a glass of water, holding it out as if to put it down in front of her. But he didn't.

"preciate it," a deep, smooth, southern-sounding purr came from slightly behind her left shoulder.

She felt the heat pool in the pit of her stomach. She looked at the waiter. The young man blushed scarlet as he extended her water, placing it in the hand attached to the long, slightly tanned arm reaching over her shoulder, little gold hairs glinting in the sunlight.

Sida could smell his musk, hard work, sawdust, pure male. Her eyes were riveted on the waiter, who was blushing and smiling like a shy schoolgirl.

"Anything else, sir?" the young man asks shyly, dipping his head.

The poor little waiter, she grinned. He was so cute and sweet, and she could *so* identify with him. It seemed the man belonging to that oh-so-sexy scent and the arm that goes with it required nothing more from the adorable young waiter.

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

The chair adjacent to hers backed up and she nervously glanced over. Well, now she knew for sure why the poor little waiter was stammering. It *had* to be illegal to look like that in public! He could have put his shirt back on, but oh man, she certainly wouldn't complain about the view.

That smile--that knowing smile went right through her. She felt her blush burn hotter.

"Hi," his rumbling purr washed over her as he sat down. "So, you gonna eat?"

"What?" she gasped. "Um, no. No, I just needed a break."

"Me too," he grinned.

Sida shook her head, fighting the urge to throw herself at his feet. She wondered if he knew how lethal his smile was to the average man-hungry twenty-three year old woman.

"Um, you looked angry before..." she began hesitantly. As conversational gambits went, it wasn't much. But it was better than "take me now" she decided.

His intent stare had her fidgeting in her seat. It was as if he was trying to read her soul. Those decadent brown eyes were warming her from the inside out and she could feel moisture gathering between her legs. It was worse when he chuckled warmly, fanning her left ear.

"It's hot," he smiled. "Nothing's going my way today. Or it wasn't until I noticed someone watching me," he wrinkled his nose and winked.

She knew her face was red and she lowered her head, trying to look away, knowing he was coming on to her, not knowing what to do about it. Her breath caught in her chest when she felt a hand under her chin.

"Hey," his whiskey purr caressed every one of her nerve endings. "I've gotta see those pretty dark eyes. You're the best thing that's happened to me all day..."

Her breath whooshed out, leaving her stunned. "Uhhhhmmm," she croaked, "I, Ummmm..." *Okay, what happened to my mental faculties...*

A golden blonde eyebrow arched up, answering that question conclusively.

"You okay, Sugar?" he rumbled at her, a wicked twinkle in those wicked eyes.

She cleared her throat, trying to be irritated at his familiarity, trying to ignore the moisture gathering down below.

"You know, you're just deadly. You know that, right?" she snapped. *Oh man*, she gasped internally. *Did I say that out loud?*

A rich chuckle vibrated from his chest, answering her question, and he pulled her sideways into a quick hug. She could forgive him his overwhelming arrogance if he

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

would just keep that up. Her brain was frozen, but her body was one twitch away from rubbing all over him like a happy feline.

“You are too much, Honey,” he laughed, his voice deep and whiskey rich as it stroked her nerve endings. He released her and leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms. “I’m glad I caught you here. We need to talk. In fact,” he dropped his arms and rose to his feet in one sexy surge, “Why don’t we take a little walk?” He stood, his hand extended to her.

Sida knew her eyes must have taken over her face. She wasn’t sure if she was shocked more by his hug or that he believed they needed to talk. Or was it that she was actually scooting her chair back and reaching for his hand? She barely knew him but she did know that she’d go anywhere with him. He could be a killer, but she told herself that, as long as that body was the last thing she ever saw, she wouldn’t care.

She knew she’d lost her mind over this man. He threw her a pleased smile and took her hand, giving it a little squeeze. To her very great surprise, he dug into his pocket and handed a bill to the cute little waiter.

“No, really,” the sweet young man stammered, refusing the money.

“Take it,” Terry Lee murmured with a sharp nod and a smile, tugging on her hand as he turned to lead her from the enclosure.

“Oh, Gawd,” the waiter breathed into her ear, squeezing her shoulder as she passed him.

“Mmm hmm,” she squeaked in answer, stumbling along gracelessly behind him.

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

Chapter Two

Terry Lee was a little surprised at his audacity, though it didn't slow him down. He'd had his eye on Sida Zhou well before her father had introduced them.

The older man had proudly announced that a small suite of offices would be added to their exclusive medical practice in honor of their daughter, a talented medical student at Boston University.

She'd smiled shyly under her father's pride and largess, but it had been obvious then that something wasn't right. Terry Lee had seen her several times since then. Each time, she'd smile at him if she saw him, and glare at his handiwork when she thought he wasn't looking. To his mind, it was high time take action--to do *something* about both things--his feelings for her, and her feelings about the suite of offices he was building for her.

He pulled her hand up so that she was almost pressed against his back. And then he kissed it. She was so sweet, and petite. He couldn't resist a little taste, licking and nipping at the knuckle of her thumb, and then glancing over his right shoulder and winking at her.

She attempted to glare at him, but failed miserably. The fact that he affected her as deeply as she did him, well, that just turned him on all the more.

"Don't worry, Sugar," he murmured, pulling her up next to him as they crossed the street, sliding an arm around her waist. "I promise I don't bite too hard..." he grinned slyly at her, sliding his hand along the back of her waist and letting it drop to caress her rear end.

"Um, what?" she stammered as he pulled her a little closer.

"Hot out here today, isn't it?" he chuckled.

She narrowed her velvet dark eyes at him and turned her toward the half-finished offices.

"This way," he purred, guiding her into the deserted, roped-off area, and then inside the little addition.

"What...Where is everyone? What are we doing here?" she asked, sounding confused and uneasy.

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

"Everyone has gone home for the afternoon," he explained. "There didn't seem any point in going forward..." he let that statement trail off, watching her face.

"My parents don't have office hours today," she murmured, looking down at her feet.

"It isn't your parents that I need to talk to about this office," he countered, his voice low, almost gentle. "This is *your* space. And so far, you don't like it."

Her gaze shot to his face, eyes wider than ever. "I haven't--I didn't say that. You're doing a fine job, really!" She seemed genuinely distressed. He had no doubt that she was.

"I know, Sugar. I know you haven't said you don't like my work." He kept his gaze locked with hers. "You haven't said a single thing about it. But you *don't* like it, do you?" When she would have looked down again, he caught her chin in his hand, tilting her face up to his. "Do you?" he asked again.

Moisture filled her eyes and she blinked it away. "It just seems so ungrateful," she sighed.

Terry Lee couldn't help it. He could no more resist pulling her into his arms than cashing in a winning lottery ticket. He didn't understand it, but she had become important to him. With no more than a few shy glances and a few covert glares, she'd captured his heart. He intended to capture hers right back. First, though, he had to get to the bottom of whatever was bothering her about this job, this suite of offices he was building for her.

She gave in with only the merest struggle, her head fitting perfectly between his throat and bare shoulder. "My parents worked really hard to be doctors, and they've worked hard for me all their lives. They're so proud of me. So proud."

"Okay, I'll buy that," he murmured, stroking her silky, black shoulder-length hair. He had to keep her talking. Thus far, she'd said nothing that could explain her distress. "You'll make a fine doctor one day," he assured her, rubbing her back with one hand.

To his deep and utter horror, she burst into tears, heart-rending sobs wracking her five foot, three inch frame. Terry Lee felt like a deer in headlights, not sure which direction to run. But standing still was not an option, so he pulled his kerchief from his back pocket, easing them both to the floor to rest his back against a sturdy beam, mopping her face as he situated her onto his lap.

After a time, the hysterical sobs lessened and he began to make out words, "Don't want to be a doctor," she choked. "I tried, really tried." Her distress ripped at his soul as she tearfully pleaded her case with him. "I could do it...I just want to be a marine biologist. But I'll break their hearts! It would be awful. I have to be a doctor or I'll devastate them..."

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

Rocking and soothing and rubbing and cooing, he finally calmed her enough to get a few words in. "Honey, there is *no* shame in being a marine biologist. There's no parent alive who'd be ashamed to have a marine biologist for a daughter. You have to talk to them about this..."

"No!" she yelped. "No," she went on in a slightly calmer voice. "You don't understand. Since I was a baby, they planned for me to be a doctor. Little baby scrubs and toy stethoscopes, summer internships to experience different specialties...they paid for my medical school tuition as a gift for graduating middle school."

"I know what you mean, Darlin', I really do," he squeezed her, hoping he was reassuring her somewhat. "My family is all construction one way or another. Between me and my cousins and our daddies, we're either building something or knocking it down. I remember standing beside my granddaddy and hammering nails into boards before I could really even walk. I guess it's just that I *want* to do this. I like what I do for a livin'."

She snuggled against him with a heavy sigh. "Maybe if I get a double doctorate..."

"Oh, god, Sugar," he shifted, amazed at her willingness to attend ten more years of school just to appease her parents, and not at all surprised at the affect her rounded derriere was having on his lap.

"Oh!" she jerked, turning on his lap and exacerbating the problem. "Oh, I'm sorry, I'm--um..." Obviously, the hard ridge of his erection had made itself known to her.

Her blush was precious, and her squirming movements were driving him out of his mind. He couldn't solve the doctor versus marine biologist problem right then, but there were other things that needed addressing.

"Its okay, Honey," he grinned. "It may be hard, but it's not gonna break off." She blushed crimson and he chuckled. "I apologize, that was a little crude, I know."

Sida giggled at him nervously. "That was a *lot* crude."

He leaned back against the unfinished beam and situated her more comfortably. Still stroking her hair, he took a chance.

"I like you. I've liked you since before I took this job," Terry Lee confessed, staring directly into her face.

"You do? Really? How?" She must've understood his confusion because she went on. "I mean, I saw you there, at the bar...*Cheers*. I've seen you there with some other guys before."

"My cousins," he supplied. "Crusher--his real name is Shane, he's the demolitions man, and Liam is like me, a builder. We hang out over there sometimes."

"And you noticed *me*?" She sounded surprised, and delighted.

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

"Of course I noticed you, Sugar." He leaned down and kissed her nose. "You're very noticeable." He took a deep breath. Time to take the plunge. "You move me, Honey...what can I say?"

"Wow..." Sida whispered reverently. "Wow...I don't know what to say. I mean..." she reached up, stroking the plane of one bronzed cheek. "I never even thought you'd noticed me. I figured I was too much an egghead for someone like you."

Terry Lee arched a glittering brow. "Someone like me?" His eyes were unreadable and she hoped he didn't have the wrong impression.

"Yeah," she felt her face flame once again and ducked her head, hiding behind the curtain of her ebony hair. "Someone so strong and sure of himself, so at ease in your own skin." She looked up, letting her hair fall back. "I'm not afraid to try new things or anything. It's just that I always feel like I need to be doing more. You know?" Would he understand what she meant? She didn't even know for sure.

"Sugar, everyone has moments of uncertainty. Like how I thought you didn't like what I've done here," he explained, inclining his head vaguely toward the half-finished room.

"But you knew it wasn't because of you!" she was alarmed. Had he really thought she disapproved of his handiwork?

Terry Lee leaned down, resting his forehead against hers. "I wasn't *completely* sure," he admitted. "I want to be in your life. I want you to be in mine. You think you can put up with a plain ole hammer and nail man like me?"

"You think you could put up with a flighty Chinese egghead who sells Mary Kay® and sings in the shower, like me?" she whispered her counterpoint, a plea and a confession all in one.

As an answer, he reached down, framing her face with his hands. His lips moved over her temples and then drifted across her eyelids and down to her mouth. His tongue traced her lips and his teeth tugged and nipped, demanding entrance. When she opened to him, his tongue found hers, stroking and probing.

His hungry mouth traveled down her chin and beyond finding her soft, vulnerable throat. He cupped a rounded breast through layers of silk and satin. Finding a tight nipple with his fingertips, he pinched lightly.

Slowly, he trailed his hand back up her shoulders and combed his fingers through her hair. With apparent difficulty, he pulled away from her, planting light kisses across her face as he did so.

Her breathing was ragged as she rested against his chest and shoulder. "I should go," she mumbled.

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

“You should stay,” he countered, kissing her again, until she was breathless. Before she could answer, he slid out from under her, leaving her sitting on the floor, stunned. “Just gonna lock up,” he explained. Standing, he turned, disappearing through the half-finished door.

Chapter Three

Sida felt bereft and boneless when his heat moved away. Expelling a heavy breath, she leaned back, arms out behind her, propping her up. Her befuddled brain was warning her to jump and run. She *knew* she was going to make a fool of herself, she just knew it. Everything was quiet in the building and she sat up straight, vaguely thinking she *would* leave.

She had just pushed herself to a full sitting position, starting to get up.

“Going somewhere?” Terry Lee asked, his voice as rough as a cat’s tongue.

She opened her mouth to speak but couldn’t force the words out. Her throat had suddenly gone dry. Too dry to swallow, she realized when he dropped to his hands and knees and began to crawl--no, stalk toward her in a predator’s prowl. She felt like an armadillo on the highway, frozen in place.

Before she could do more than lean back, he moved over her, a hungry wolf claiming his territory and in more ways than one. His mouth attacked her throat as he nibbled his way from her clavicle up to her jaw and around behind her ear.

If that wasn’t enough, he began lowering his body, his pelvis, onto hers. “Um, hi?” she croaked, looking into his rich, honey brown eyes.

“Hi, yourself,” his deep rumbling purr echoed through her entire body, stopping just south of her bellybutton.

She felt herself falling, her arms turning to spaghetti at the sound. Before she could collapse to the floor, a long, strong arm slid under her and pulled her hard against a naked and furry chest.

His feather soft lips caressed hers and his tongue traced her lower lip until she opened her mouth. She groaned aloud when he nipped her bottom lip, and then his tongue was in her mouth and her hands were buried in that so soft pelt of hair on his chest.

“Mmm,” she moaned in return, feeling a peaked and hard little male nipple under her fingertips. Groaning again as he traced delicate patterns on the roof of her mouth.

She’d worn a thin silk sleeveless top and she knew it couldn’t hold up under the strain. She felt a warm and calloused hand push the light material aside and she no longer cared it ripped. In fact, she hated it right then.

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

Soon, his mobile fingers were skimming her stomach his other hand began rubbing her neck and upper back. The thin material slid delicately off her shoulder along with her bra-strap and his thumb moved to take its place. Before she could even register the feel of cool air on her skin, she found herself arching into the palm of hand wantonly.

He pushed the material at her clavicle out of the way with his lips as his hand crept up her rib cage. She fought the urge to wriggle into his hand, though he seemed to be reading her mind.

His callused fingers traveled under the material to her hard and pointed nipple. She heard herself moan as if from far away.

“Yeah, Sugar, oh yeah,” he murmured, his hard length pressing into her thigh.

His mobile mouth was wet and warm, nibbling and sucking its way down her throat, transporting her into another world. Like an affectionate kitten, she rubbed against him, hip-to-hip, thigh-to-thigh, her hands seeking more of his warm bronzed skin.

His hand moved to cover hers, guiding it through the silky mat on his chest and down the arrowing softness pointing to his belly button and the snap on his jeans. All she wanted was more of him, more closeness, more skin, more.

What a flat stomach, and those abs! A six-pack, definitely! She hooked a leg across his thigh and bit down on his shoulder, her hand still traveling south.

“Hey, Sugar Baby,” he purred, lacing his fingers through the hand traveling down his furred tummy. “We’ve got time. I’m hungry, too. Let’s just eat together...”

His mouth moved to cover hers again and she groaned into it. “I’ve never wanted anything so much,” she panted, “More,” she moaned into his mouth as his free hand traveled to pinch her other turgid nipple. “Yes,” she sighed.

“Yeah,” he agreed, sucking behind her ear as he massaged the sensitive flesh around her hard peak.

Sida moved their entwined hands down to the waist of his pants and unsnapped the fastener. He rolled them both over so that she was resting on top of him.

With a flex of his hips he let her know how much *more* he really did have to offer. Straddling him she let her knees fall to the floor on either side of his waist. Holding her tight, he thrust his rigid erection up between her legs.

His hands eased under her shirt and began to slide it off, his thumbs hooking the lacy material of her bra and pushing it, along with the flimsy blouse, up and over her head.

Cupping both bare mounds of flesh, his mouth traveled from her throat to her shoulder to suck in a nipple only recently left alone. His roving hand, fingers splayed wide, slowly made its way down her ribs.

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

“Yesss,” she hissed, arching up into his mouth when he bit at one hard nipple and then sucked it into his mouth.

Belatedly, she realized that both of her hands were completely free. She let one play with the soft arrow of hair heading toward the fly of his jeans. Before long her attention was evenly divided between the soft pelt of hair on his chest and the softer hair disappearing under his waistband.

“Oh, Sugar, you’ve gotta stop or this’ll be over before it gets *really* good,” he moaned, one of his own hands traveling south now.

Sida tried worked his zipper down, but his distended girth pulled the metal teeth tight. Before she could solve the problem, his magic fingers had had their way with the fasteners on her pants. *Hmmm*, she thought, a squirm here, a squirm there... *Yeah!* Right where she wanted those callused fingers.

She opened her legs just a little further. “Let’s both get a little more comfortable,” he rumbled and she heard the rasp of his zipper.

Her hands follow the noise and ...

Oh my! What big... “For me?” she gasped, reaching into his boxers.

“Oh yeah, Sugar, that’s all for you,” he murmured, sounding a little short of breath.

“So big,” she groaned, letting her fingers do the walking.

Smooth and silky, hard as a steel girder and she felt the slick liquid at his slit with the tip of an exploring finger. She swiped at the sticky pre-cum and carried it to her mouth, closing her eyes to savor the taste.

“Oh, God, Sugar, I think I’m in love,” he groaned, and she felt a bit of a breeze as he pushed the confining fabric off of her hips and down her thighs.

With a kick and another squirm, she spread her legs wide. His long fingers rubbing *right there*. He certainly knew how to work with his hands. And those calluses in all in the right places.

Sida had never felt so down, dirty and wanton in her whole life as she spread her legs and arched her back letting him push those workingman fingers deep inside of her.

“Yeah, Sugar, you like that, huh?” he murmured, and she opened her eyes a crack. He’s got that proud, king of the mountain look about him. Taking him down a peg should be fun--in more ways than one.

Giving his hard erection a pull and a squeeze, she purred, “Mmm hmm,” reaching down with her free hand to cup his fuzzy, round sacs.

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

One sexy shimmy and a slide, freed him of his jeans, leaving him as bare as she was. His long, hard erection parted her weeping lips and she wrapped one leg around his. She wanted him in her, not *on* her.

“Easy, Sugar,” Terry Lee groaned, his voice is raspy and tight. “How ‘bout you reach over there and snag my pants? I think I’ve got an emergency condom tucked away.”

“Emergency condom?” Yes, she was all heated up, but come *on*! She stretched as far as she could and not lose bodily contact. “What? You were afraid you’d trip and fuck something?”

She just barely touched the wad of jeans when he began to shake, and then guffaw. Gathering her tight against his chest, he covered her mouth with his. He was a keeper, Sida decided, kissing, laughing and rolling her over, all at one time. Somehow, in the tumble, she managed to fit the slippery rubber over his straining erection.

The last roll over put her on top. She pushed herself into a kneeling position, breaking their kiss and situating her directly above his leaking rod.

Never taking her eyes off of his, she lowered herself just barely onto the tip. Her eyes slitting, she reached between her legs to massage herself, just feeling the wide head of his shaft in her opening.

Smiling seductively as his eyes opened wide, she idly brought her free hand up to fondle a breast.

“Oh good god, Sugar,” he choked; his hips were straining to rise.

“I like this,” she murmured, smiling sweetly.

“Sida, Sugar, please,” he begged, “Don’t tease...”

“Tease? Don’t tease?” she gave that some thought--about a second and a half’s worth. “Okay.”

With a smile, she opened her legs wide and settled onto his hard erection.

“Oh, Darlin’,” he groaned.

Slowly she rose, feeling his strong grip tighten on her hips. He held her in place and flexed. All she could do was gasp as, filling her completely his hard length surged into her from below.

“Like that, Sugar?” his voice sounds like a husky, painful whisper.

“Yeah,” she choked, leaning back, gripping his thighs, riding him.

Still holding her in place, he pumps his hips up, once, twice, a third time, hard, pulling almost out every time.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” she urged, leaning forward, her chest rubbing his as his hands slid around to cup her derriere.

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

Every upward heave caused his fingers to slip between her nether cheeks, caressing that so sensitive flesh there. Sida couldn't help moaning, not bothering to thrust back, just letting him do all the work.

She wanted more from him, more contact, more something. Not able to get any words out, she bit down on the ball of his muscular shoulder.

That had the desired effect. With a grunt and a roll, Terry Lee was back on top with her legs wrapped around his waist. His big, wide palms cupping her cheeks and plunging for all he was worth.

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

Chapter Four

“What do you think of this one?” Sida asked, holding an acid green halter top up for approval.

“You have *never* looked good in that color, Sida,” declared her best friend Shirl, shaking her head. “Why are you even looking at that?”

Replacing the top on the rack, Sida sifted through the offerings, sliding one hanger after another around the circular metal bar. “I just want to catch Terry Lee’s eye, that’s all,” she murmured, lifting a bright orange halter and holding it against her chest.

“You’ve caught his eye, girlfriend,” Shirl planted both hands on her hips and aimed a glare at her friend. “You wear that, you’ll blind him...and not in a good way, either!”

“There’s a good way to blind somebody?” Sida giggled, putting the orange scrap of fabric back where it came from.

“You know what I mean!” Shirl growled, turning her back on her friend and flouncing over to a clearance wrack. “We hit some good sales today. Is every store in the mall having a sale?”

“I really *don’t* know what you mean,” Sida snorted, skimming through the offerings in front of her. “And yeah, it’s a special, end of season thing, I think.”

Shirl huffed impatiently. “I *mean* that poor Terry Lee is already blind to everybody but you, Hon. But if you show up wearing something *that* tacky, he’ll be just plain blind.”

“Don’t you have these in a size nine?” Sida demanded loudly of a nearby sales girl. She smiled, softening her imperious tone somewhat.

“I’ll go see, but I don’t think so,” the young woman offered, disappearing quickly into a back room behind the register.

Shirl snickered at her friend, earning herself an elbow to the ribs. “It’s just your world and we’re all living in it, huh?” she joked.

“Works for me,” Sida agreed, grinning at her friend. “So, do you think Terry Lee is really serious about me?” she asked, her tone bland, trying to minimize how important

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

the answer was to her. She glanced over at the other woman, looking to catch her reaction.

“Serious? Come on, Sida!” Shirl rolled her eyes dramatically. “That boy has got it *baaaaad!*” She nudged Sida with her hip. “Almost as bad as you!” she snickered.

Sida felt her face heat up. She couldn’t deny it. She *did* have it bad. *Very* bad.

“He wants me to tell my parents that I don’t really want to be a doctor.” She let that hang in the air, knowing well how her friend felt about that.

“Good. You *should* tell them that, girl. It’s almost like lying to ‘em, not telling them...especially with them building you those offices,” Shirl insisted.

“He didn’t put it *quite* that way,” Sida mumbled, holding up a bottle green top for Shirl’s approval. A nod of approval and she turned just as the sales clerk appeared.

“One pair left,” she smiled, offering the garment to Sida.

“Perfect,” Sida grinned in praise, beaming at the pleased young woman. Turning back to Shirl, she went on, “I don’t think they could handle me telling them both things at once,” she informed her friend. At Shirl’s blank look, she explained, “You know, if I told them I’m in love with a carpenter *and* I don’t want to do what they’ve always dreamed for me. It just seems like a bit much...”

“I guess...” Shirl shrugged. “So you still want to get your legs waxed?” she asked, leading the way to the check out counter.

“Maybe my pits,” Sida murmured, looking at the strappy green tank top.

Shirl shuddered dramatically, a look of horror on her face. “You are a tougher woman than I am. I can’t see how coming clean to your folks could possibly be worse than letting someone rip the hair out of your armpits.”

“The hair thing will hurt for a day or so, and it’ll grow in lighter next time. Telling my folks...that lasts forever,” Sida sighed, saying nothing more as she led the way out of the clothing store.

Terry Lee lifted his full frosty mug; heavily tapping the two other sloshing mugs aimed his way in a genial salute. Nothing was said for long minutes as his cousins downed several swallows. All three men sighed simultaneously in appreciation.

“So, you still seeing that little girl?” his oldest cousin, Crusher, asked after he’d downed most of the amber liquid in his mug.

Terry Lee grinned, taking another swallow of beer.

“I’d say so, if that goofy look on his face is anything to go by,” his cousin Liam ribbed.

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

“Goofy? You’re a fine one to talk, chicken boy,” Terry Lee attacked back, good-naturedly. After another swallow of beer, he went on, “And yeah, I’m seeing her, hell yeah. So keep your eyes on your own women,” he growled.

“Ohhh, listen to that,” Crusher chortled. “I think the south has been conquered, boys and girls.”

“Sounds like it to me,” Liam agreed with a snicker. “So, what’s the problem?” he asked, serious now.

“Who said there was a problem?” Terry Lee asked carefully, cutting his eyes over at his cousin.

“Come on, something’s wrong. What’s up?” Crusher joined in the pressure. “I could tell by your eyes. Hey, we’re your family, ‘fess up.”

Terry Lee looked at Liam and then at Crusher. He shrugged. They *were* his family. And he was a very long way from home, but for them. Anyway, he couldn’t deny it. He was very concerned about Sida’s reluctance to come clean with her parents about her career desires. That sort of denial could cause nothing but long-term problems.

He sighed. “Yeah, you’re my family.” He nodded gratefully at each man. Taking a deep breath, he explained, “She’s the daughter of those doctors up the street,” he angled his head toward the Zhou family’s medical practice.

“The one where you’re adding on an office?” Liam asked.

“Yeah,” Terry Lee agreed. “It’s for her, for Sida. The problem is, she doesn’t want to be a doctor. So...I just can’t, in good conscience, finish the office.”

“Wait a minute,” Crusher interrupted. “I really don’t get the problem.”

“Me neither,” Liam chimed in. “They ordered the office, so build it. She can use it for whatever she wants. She’s either a doctor or she isn’t, right?”

“Uh, no. See, here’s the deal,” Terry Lee leaned forward. It *did* feel good to talk to his cousins about all this. “She’s in medical school, but she doesn’t really want to be a doctor. She *really* wants to be a marine biologist. But her parents have been planning for her to be a doctor her entire life. She doesn’t want to hurt them--she thinks they’ll be devastated if she tells ‘em. So...” he expelled a heavy sigh and finished his beer. “So, she’s just going to go through however many years of medical school, be a doctor, and study marine biology on the side.”

“Another round,” Crusher ordered, holding up his hand so the bartender could see them. “Amazing,” he breathed, shaking his head.

“I know, man,” Terry Lee agreed, slumping back in his chair. “And I know I’m in love with her. I hate to see her go through all that. Add to that, I can’t finish the office. Like I said, it just wouldn’t be right.”

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

“That’s a lot to go through for your parents,” Liam drummed his fingers on the table. “I wish I knew what to tell ya, buddy,” he reached over to squeeze Terry Lee’s arm.

“I’m pretty sure she feels the same way about me that I do about her. I’m pretty sure,” he repeated. “Thing is,” he paused while the bartender slid three more mugs in front of the men. With a nod, he thanked the man and went on. “Thing is, I don’t know how her parents are gonna feel about their little doctor hooking up with a blue-collar boy guy like me.” With a heavy breath, Terry Lee looked around at his cousins.

He at least felt better, having it all out in the open. With somebody...

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

Chapter Five

Parking his truck, Terry Lee groaned, covertly adjusting himself as he remembered making love with Sida the night before. The finish had been spectacular. So much so that he had nearly blacked out. So had she, in fact.

Neither of them had been able to move for long minutes, and only minimally after that. He had collapsed half on, half off of her, pulling her against him and into his arms, the second he managed to catch his breath.

Now, even though he'd spent almost every day with her over the last two weeks, she was still all he could think about. That first time, they'd lain in the half-finished office for hours afterward, just talking.

Sida had confessed her obsession with lighthouses and declared herself a "diva"--he still wasn't sure what that was, but whatever, he was falling harder and harder for her with every second.

The only thing he had any reservations about at all was this thing with her parents. He just hated that she felt she had to adopt a career that she didn't want, just because they'd planned it for her.

Terry Lee was sure that, over time, Sida would see that it was a mistake to force herself into such an involved profession when her heart wasn't in it. A thrill of unease snaked up his spine as he saw the animated silhouettes of two people beyond the curtains of her father's office.

Opening the lobby door, he was glad that no patients were present. Mr. Zhou was certainly agitated, from the sound of things. Terry Lee wanted to go and comfort Sida, whose voice could be heard in conflict with that of her father's.

"What? Now you don't like carpenters?" She said angrily. Terry Lee stopped and waited. Was she telling her father about their budding relationship?

"I have nothing against carpenters," Mr. Zhou objected. Terry Lee exhaled. He hadn't even realized he'd been holding his breath. "It is an honorable profession, Sida. I simply think that you will be happiest with someone who understands you, who shares more with you."

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

“Terry Lee understands me fine,” she all but growled, the door opening into the waiting room where he stood. “And anyway, if you love someone, you understand plenty!”

She turned and was standing in front of him.

“You love me?” he grinned at her.

Mr. Zhou made a sound of disgust and rolled his eyes heavenward. “You!” he snapped. “You were not hired to defile my daughter, but to do a job of work for me! The office remains unfinished!”

“Um, about that, Mr. Zhou...” Terry Lee began.

“No!” the older man spat. “I have no patience for you now,” he declared, holding out one fine-boned hand. Before Terry Lee could respond, Sida’s father had retreated back into his office, slamming the door hard enough to rattle the pictures hung on a nearby wall.

“I like fish,” Terry Lee smiled down at Sida, pulling her against him.

“So?” she rolled her eyes at him, much like her father had, though she was obviously trying not to grin back.

“Marine biologist? Fish?” he clarified, somewhat unhelpfully, he could see by her face. “You didn’t tell him, did you?”

“I never said I would,” she snuggled against him, hiding her warm cheeks against his chest.

“Sugar, this is...I can’t believe you told him about me but didn’t say a word about not wanting to be a doctor.” He stroked her cheek, his fingers cupping her chin and urging her to look up at him. “I love you, too,” he leaned down, kissing her nose, and then her lips, but lightly. “What you do with your life is at least as important as who you do it with, Darlin’. I really want you to be happy. I hope we can be happy together, of course. You know that, right?”

She graced him with a sunny smile. “Yeah,” she sighed. Straightening up, she added stoutly, “I want to be with you, and vice versa. I mean...you heard me. I love you. But my parents are my business. And I’m going to do what I think I need to do there.”

Terry Lee leaned back carefully, ignoring the challenge in her voice and her eyes. He could practically *see* the boundary lines she was drawing. He had to tread lightly here.

“I don’t want to get in the middle of your relationship with your parents here, Honey. I’m not going to,” he promised. “But a life built on lies and omissions is no life at all.” She opened her mouth to speak and he laid a finger across her lips. “I’d rather be with you than without you, anytime and anyplace. This is important, though. It’s as important as your happiness and the rest of our lives. Just think about it, okay?”

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

Sida turned her light brown eyes up at him, filled with tears, and Terry Lee felt like he'd kicked a puppy.

"I'll think about it," Sida sniffed.

"Let's go be in love...want to?" he scooped an arm around her, gathering her up against his chest.

"Yeah," she breathed huskily, "I want to."

Terry Lee turned her toward the door, leading her out and away from the source of their disagreement. Neither one noticed the figure of Sida's father, framed in the slightly ajar door to his office.

Chapter Six

Sida was a nervous wreck. Her mother had called her and insisted she come to their offices at six-thirty that evening. The older woman refused to tell her anything more than to be there and be on time.

She hadn't seen her father for three days, even though she'd tried to visit him. Sida wanted to make things right. While she didn't feel good about coming clean regarding her career choice, she was working on it--trying to work things out in her mind. In the meantime, she didn't want to be at odds with her parents. She loved them very much.

Rounding the corner in front of her parents' offices, she was even more distraught to see Terry Lee coming from the other direction, a confused look on his face. She knew he'd more or less halted work on the office her parents had commissioned him to do.

In fact, that office, the very thing that had brought them together, was agonizingly close to tearing them apart. Terry Lee had basically refused to work on it at all, saying that he couldn't do the job under false pretenses. Sida insisted that she would use the office suite and that he should finish it. They were currently at an impasse.

"Sugar, maybe you shouldn't be here right now," he told her gently, cupping her face for a kiss, as soon as he was close enough.

"My mother insisted," she croaked, very nervous indeed.

"Your father called me in to meet with him. I think he's going to fire me," Terry Lee looked away, uncomfortable.

"No, I won't let him do that," she jumped up, throwing her arms around him. Obviously, he felt ashamed at the thought of being fired.

"Honey, it's his money, if he wants to fire me, there's nothing we can do about it," he countered.

"I'm going to tell him," she declared, straightening up, determined now. "I'm going to tell him that I don't want to be a doctor. Then he can't fire you!"

"Oh, Honey," he wrapped both arms around her, pressing her full-length against him. "Being fired isn't the worse thing that can happen to me. You tell him when you're ready, and not one minute before."

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

Squirming a little, Sida slid out of his arms, turning to march into her father's office. She didn't care what he did to her, but Terry Lee? That was something else all together.

"You lied to me!" her father barked just as soon as she crossed the threshold.

"Now just a minute!" Terry Lee objected from so close behind her that she could feel his chest vibrate.

"Papa," she protested, laying a calming hand on Terry Lee's arm.

"And I..." her father halted, joined by her mother.

"We," the dainty woman insisted.

"We," her father nodded, "we bullied you."

"What?" Sida gasped, looking from one parent to the other. "Bullied?"

"It's true, daughter," the older man hung his head.

"Mom?" Sida turned to her mother, incredulous.

"Your father and I are very happy in our chosen profession," her mother began to explain, stepping forward. "We are most fortunate that we each found love with someone who is happy in the same career. Since we are so truly happy with each other and with what we do for our life's work..."

"We wanted that happiness for you, whom we love very much," her father finished his wife's statement.

Terry Lee gave Sida a little nudge. She looked over her shoulder at him, tears streaming down her face.

"Go on," he whispered, feeling a little choked up, too.

Sida rushed forward, wrapping both arms around her parents, murmuring, "I love you guys, too, so much."

"We would love you no matter what you do," Mrs. Zhou assured her daughter. "We'll always be proud of you. There is no shame in becoming a marine biologist," she said, repeating almost exactly what Terry Lee had told Sida only a couple two weeks prior.

Terry Lee began to back out of the room, his hand on the door behind him. "Oh no you don't, young man!" Mr. Zhou stopped him before he could turn the knob. "You still have some work to finish!"

He wasn't sure what to do and Sida's father appeared to be very put out with him. She was no help at all, clinging to her mother as the two women chattered like little magpies.

"I really didn't want to..." he started, not quite sure how to pacify the older man.

"Come this way!" Mr. Zhou ordered brusquely.

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

Terry Lee shrugged his shoulders, glancing over at Sida. She shrugged back and took his hand, following her father down the hall toward the offices that were to be hers.

Opening the door to the unfinished office, Sida's father stepped back, a wide flourish indicating that the couple should precede him.

No sooner had Terry Lee crossed the threshold than a deep booming voice began to sing, "*Don't worry, be happy!*"

Sida's mouth dropped open, doing a fair imitation of Terry Lee, as two pairs of eyes landed on a plaque, nailed to a bare wall. "*Don't worry, be happy!*" sang the undulating mock bass a second time.

Terry Lee's glanced over at Mrs. Zhou who was shaking her head, though she had a hand over her mouth, snickering.

"Welcome to the family, marine biologist and hillbilly carpenter!" crowed the older man, laughing gleefully.

"Well I'll be go to hell," breathed Terry Lee.

"Papa?" Sida's eyes were wide with shock. He couldn't stop himself, and began to laugh out loud.

"You can catch them, she can cut them up, and we'll eat them!" Mr. Zhou chortled.

Before long, both couples were laughing too hard to stop.

"You *know* that's not what marine biologists do, right?" Sida grumped as Terry Lee slid her tank top over her head later in the day.

"What's that, Sugar?" he asked absently, bending down to show his appreciation for the built-in support of the otherwise flimsy garment. He'd already removed his shoes and shirt, only too happy to help her out of her clothes.

"We don't just cut up fish," she grumped.

"Course not," he agreed, lathing a peaked breast with his tongue as he helped her out of the hip-hugger Capri pants she wore, his hands wandering back up to cup her rounded buttocks.

"You're not listening to me," she playfully pouted, her own hands dipping into the opening of his jeans.

"Every word, I swear," he promised, throwing his head back and breathing heavily as her fingers wrapped around his hard cock. "By the way..." Terry Lee began, lowering his lips to hers as he walked her backward to his bed.

"Yes?" she breathed against his mouth, crawling backward across the comforter.

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

"I was goin' to ask you to marry me today," he murmured, his hands skimming lightly over her breasts, down to her ribs, coming to rest on her hips.

"What?" she choked out, eyes wide in the dim room.

"I mean, today I planned to ask you if, one day soon, you want to get married," he clarified.

"Me?" she squeaked, her voice a shrill squeal.

"Uh, yeah," he nodded, sitting back on his heels, showing her the ring he'd had hidden in his palm. "Seein' as how I already got welcomed to the family, it seems a little anti-climactic, doesn't it?" Before she could answer, he slid it onto her ring finger, enjoying her stunned silence.

That, of course, didn't last long.

"No! I mean yes!" Sida threw both arms around him. "I mean I'll marry you!"

"Now that's what I wanna hear," Terry Lee growled as he leaned forward, one hand on either side of her, his mouth came down on top of hers, his tongue dipping between her lips, tasting her.

Moving down her body, he gently rolled an erect nipple with his tongue, alternately sucking and nipping it before sliding his hand feather light along her ribs and over her belly. She arched her back, groaning as his wayward hand moved between her legs.

Kissing and licking a trail to the top of her tight dark curls, his hands parted her thighs, two fingers finding her moist center. Warm breath blew across her causing an involuntary shudder as she strained toward him. Her body begged him for more as her fingers entwined in his hair alternately pushing, pulling, grasping, and seeking to guide him as she tried to force the contact she craved.

Slowly, torturously, his fingers slipped through the soft velvet moisture, touching, tormenting, and fueling her burning desire. Leisurely, he slid lower, spreading moist open kisses along her inner thighs, nibbling, sucking, and licking a path to where his fingers gently opened her to him.

She cried out softly as he tasted her, broad strokes lapping the sweet salty juices, gradually swirling his tongue toward her aching bundle of nerves. Darting and teasing, she gasped, writhing beneath his delicious assault as he brought her to the edge only to ease her down again and again until she cried out, needing to cum.

Again the tip of his tongue traveled teasingly over the length of her, lathing and stroking before returning to flick at her center. Three fingers entered her as warm moist lips enclosed her, thrusting, sucking and licking, while she bucked against him until she screamed her release.

Cyndi Redding, Isabelle Drake, J.J. Massa

Terry Lee could still feel the fine tremors of her climax as his body covered her, thrusting into her, burying himself balls-deep inside her wet heat. Her pussy clenched around him, tight, hungry. She shuddered beneath him, coming nearly instantly.

Pumping into her, he couldn't stop, feeling her wrap her legs around his waist. Together they established a frenzied rhythm. His one hand stroked just above their joining while the other gripped her hip.

She frantically ground her body into his, moaning as she threw her head back, her body clamping hard on his cock as her inner muscles gripped him. He held on tight to her hips, slamming into her once, twice, then shouted her name as his own climax ripped through him.

Panting heavily, he rolled off of her, exhausted.

"Good thing you're so fit," she managed after a few minutes.

"Hard work and clean livin'," he grunted.

"Makes for a good, hard body," she mumbled, curling against him.

Reaching down for the comforter, he grinned. "Makes for a lot of hard things. Good thing I've got a hammer."

HARD HATS, HARD BODIES

About the Author

Jersey Shore resident, J.J. Massa sits with her writing partner and yellow lab, Cosmo, at her side at all the times for plot twists and character advice. There are some visiting cats, aquatic turtles, and an assortment of hermit crabs just to keep things interesting. There's never a dull moment in the Massa household. Maybe that's why there's never a dull moment in J.J. Massa's books...

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