

Hard

by Katrina Gray

ROCCO SIFFREDI. This was name on Amy's note, and she wasn't sure she'd spelled it right. She hiked Clarissa onto her hip and walked in the store.

The clerk at the front doodled on a piece of register tape and talked on her cell phone. She looked up when Amy came in. "Need help?" Amy shook her head. The wall of movies was straight ahead, and she didn't want to cause a fuss.

"Mama?" said Clarissa. She pointed at the magazines covered in plastic and grew louder and more insistent. "Mama! Mama!"

Amy walked on. "No, not Mama." Clarissa arched her back and squirmed. She wanted down; she wanted to walk. She grunted and reached out for the gummy penises, but no sooner than Amy swatted her hand away, Clarissa saw something else she wanted to touch. A few more seconds in her arms, restrained, and the kid would howl. "Fine," said Amy. She could clean up any damage after she found her movie.

In her pink overalls, Clarissa toddled over to a row of toys, bright and colorful things shaped like big popsicles. Curved popsicles and straight ones. Blues, greens, pinks, browns. Clarissa grabbed a package with a silver one inside, and she stuck out her tongue at her upside-down reflection. She squealed and grinned, jumped with her chubby legs, looked to her mother, who feigned excitement and nodded without looking away from the rows of DVDs.

The clerk put down her phone and giggled. "Starting out early?" Her phone lit up and played "Rock the Casbah." She rolled her eyes. "God," she muttered. "Not again."

Clarissa saw another shiny one behind the package she had grabbed, and she wanted that one too, wanted them all. She yanked them from the shelves, four or five in one armful, ripping the cardboard at the tops of the packages with each final tug. When Amy yelled to stop, Clarissa scuttled away, a trail of dildos behind her, and two clutched to her chest. Amy ran after her, but Clarissa picked up speed.

Rounding a corner, Clarissa wiped out and hit the floor chin-first. She wailed and the dildos skittered away under a display. Amy picked her up and saw that her daughter's only two teeth had bitten her bottom lip. There was blood, lots of it. The clerk hurried over and stared. Amy clutched Clarissa, rocked her, but that was not working.

"I have to go Neil!" the clerk yelled into her phone. "There's like a baby hurt or something."

Clarissa clawed at Amy's blouse, wanting boob, wanting comfort. Amy wiped Clarissa's forehead and unbuttoned instinctively.

The clerk scowled. "You can't do that here, ma'am. Not unless you cover up."

Amy felt humiliated. Her face flushed red, and she folded her shoulders toward her chest, trying to get Clarissa to suck on her finger, but the kid only wanted one thing. A man with a mustache, the only other customer, stared.

"Boo boo!" Clarissa cried. "Boob!"

Amy hurried out, still unbuttoned. She opened the driver side of her Corolla, sat down, and let Clarissa suck. The crying stopped, and Amy was able to assess Clarissa's damage. No stitches, she decided. Just home. Let's just go home.

She was tired of doing this alone. There were long dry spells. She was in one. She told this to a friend the night before. "Get a Rocco Siffredi movie," said the friend. "You'll never need a man again."

"Hang on," said Amy. "I can't find a pen."

