



WHAT'S
YOUR
Pleasure

Pleasure
MARIE HAYNES

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What's Your Pleasure

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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

Pleasure

WHAT'S YOUR PLEASURE

Marie Haynes

Dedication

To my Circle of Friends. Without you guys, I'd never have made it this far. I love you all.

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Chapter One

Butterballs Shot

1 ½ shots butterscotch schnapps

½ shot coffee liqueur

Serve in a double shot glass. Can be mixed, but better if layered with schnapps first, then top with the coffee.

Vincent ran his hand through his brown hair and sighed. He had been sitting at his desk for two hours trying to balance the books, but no matter how many times he crunched the numbers, they kept coming up short. What he needed to save *Hot Shots* was nothing short of a damned miracle. Flexing his broad shoulders, Vincent decided he could use another cup of coffee.

Pushing open his office door, he entered his bar and glanced around. At 10:00 in the morning, the place was closed for business, but he still felt a rush a pride as he glanced around the establishment. He'd purchased *Hot Shots* in the historic Souldard area of St. Louis ten years ago in an act of desperation. Despite his high paying position as the head accountant at a large St. Louis-based company, the stress of corporate life had been slowly killing him. At the age of thirty-four, he had been diagnosed with high blood pressure and suffered an ulcer. Six months after the diagnosis, he'd quit his job and invested a good chunk of his savings in this bar. Up until recently, he'd been turning an easy profit, but since the recent recession, fewer and fewer patrons frequented the once popular night spot. At least his business was still open. Many area businesses had been forced to close their doors.

He poured himself another cup of strong coffee and heard a knocking on the front door.

Turning quickly around, he almost choked on the hot liquid. Standing just outside was perhaps the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She was a petite little thing, couldn't be more than five foot two, he estimated. Short, white-blond hair framed her pixie face. He

could easily tell that her small breasts rested free of undergarments beneath a light pink T-shirt. Grinning, he set down his coffee mug and walked to the door.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"You need help?" she quickly countered.

For a moment, Vincent thought the girl was nuts. What was she talking about? Apparently, his thoughts must have shown on his face because she pointed to the sign in the window.

"A bartender?" she continued. "Your sign says you need a bartender."

"Oh," Vincent said, remembering he'd placed the Help Wanted sign only that morning. Last night, his bartender had casually announced she was pregnant and would no longer work in such a raunchy establishment as *Hot Shots*. So maybe the bar was a bit dusty and the furnishings old, but to call it raunchy was simply an insult. Vincent preferred to think of the stained wood floors, the names carved into the tables and the fading paint on the walls as character.

"Y-yeah," he stammered, hoping desperately he didn't sound as stupid as he felt. "I just put the sign out there. Won't you come in?"

"Thanks. So, what do you need to know about me?" she asked.

What do you look like naked? Vincent shook his head slightly, trying to rid himself of that rude, but legitimate, question.

"Why don't you have a seat and we'll chat. Would you like some coffee?" He indicated a tall table.

"Yes, please. Black."

Vincent nodded, walked behind the bar and poured a second mug full of the steaming liquid.

"You sure? I make it pretty strong," he warned.

She turned deep green eyes to him and, without blinking, said, "I like it strong."

Vincent damn near swallowed his own tongue.

Okay, don't blow this, he thought. You need a bartender, not a quick roll in the hay. Think with the big head on top.

Forcing himself to look at her eyes, not her boobs, he handed her the steaming mug and leaned his elbows on the bar.

"Let's start with the basics. I'm Vincent Milo, owner of Hot Shots," he began, and he held out his hand.

"Josephine Dunes," she answered, grasping it firmly.

Wow! She has soft hands. Bet they'd feel great on my... Stop it!

Dropping his hand quickly, he reached for his mug to steady himself.

"So, what experience do you have?" he began again, trying not to stare as her pink little tongue darted out to lick a drop of coffee.

"My parents owned a bar up in Springfield," she started.

"Missouri or Illinois?"

"Illinois. They opened it when I was seventeen, and I started working for them. You know, mopping, dishes, that type of thing, first. When I turned twenty-one, I started working the bar, so you could say I've worked in one for about ten years."

"So that puts you at twenty-seven years old?"

Josephine grinned. "So you're a math genius, huh?"

Vincent felt himself blush.

Suddenly, the grin vanished from her face. "Oh, sorry. There I go with my smart mouth, and I'm not even hired, yet."

"No problem," Vincent assured her. "I like a smart mouth, as long as it's attached to a smart brain. So, you're experienced. Let me give you the lay of the land here. First, the bar could be doing better. With the economy like it is, people just aren't coming out like they used to. I need a bartender with enough personality and experience to help keep this place going."

"So you're looking for a bartender to save the place?" she asked sceptically.

Vincent shook his head. "No, not at all. I'm not doing that badly, but my last bartender quit due to a pregnancy. The one before that was a large, smelly guy whom many of the female patrons found objectionable, and the one before that was a hot little redhead who ran off with her best friend's husband."

"Ouch!"

"Yeah. I'm looking for someone who is reliable but whom I can also bounce ideas off of. I'm open to new ideas, as well," he added.

"Well, I also have a degree in Marketing, so I might be an advantage there," she said.

"I gotta say, I don't usually make rash decisions, but I think you're hired." He smiled.

Josephine nodded but didn't answer immediately. "When do I start?"

"Tonight? It could be a trial run for us both," Vincent offered. "If it works out, we can discuss and agree on the particulars after the shift."

Josephine stood and held out her hand. "Deal."

Vincent again shook it and grinned.

"Just one more question?" she asked.

"Shoot."

"Do you know of any decent but cheap hotels around?"

Suddenly, he noticed the ragged backpack and large purse she carried. "You're not from around here?" he deduced.

"No." She gave him that lopsided grin again. "I'm from Springfield, remember? I just got into town last night."

Vincent frowned. "You came to a new town without a job or a place to stay?"

"Listen, *Dad*, I'm a big girl, now. I can take care of myself," she answered tartly.

"Sorry, but isn't that a little risky?"

Josephine sighed. "No, I'm sorry. I snapped at you, and that was inappropriate," she admitted. "As to risky, yeah, probably. But I needed to get out of town, and I do have some friends here in St. Louis. I would just rather not take advantage of their hospitality if I don't have to. My one friend, Renee, has a room I can use, but she's recovering from a nasty stomach virus, so I'd just as soon stay away for a bit longer."

Vincent ran his hands through his hair and considered her situation. "I know of a few places to stay, but if you want, there's a small apartment upstairs. You can crash there for a few nights."

Rather than answer, she just raised one eyebrow.

“Seriously,” he said, crossing his heart with an index finger. “I’m not a pervert or anything. I live a few blocks away, so it’s not like I’d be staying.”

Still, she said nothing.

Vincent sighed. “Take it or leave it. It can be on a trial basis, as well. Truthfully, it’s really small and probably dirty. Hasn’t been used in several months. Still, I wouldn’t mind someone living up there and keeping on eye on the place for me, and it would be convenient for you.”

Vincent waited, watching a variety of expressions pass over her delicate features.

Finally, she nodded, “Okay. I’ll take it, but this is just a trial. And I have to warn you, I have an older brother who taught me just where and how hard to kick a man so he won’t get back up again. Understand?”

Paling slightly, Vincent nodded. “Understood. Come on, I’ll show you the room.”

Chapter Two

Green Eyed Blonde Girl

1 part melon liqueur

1 part banana liqueur

1 part Irish Cream

Carefully layer in a shot glass.

Tossing her backpack onto the bed, Joe shook her head slightly as a cloud of dust sparkled in the sunlight. What had she gotten herself into this time? Still, with a little cleaning and airing out, the room would have potential. A typical shotgun style design, the front door opened into the living room which led into the kitchen which led into the bedroom. Just off from the kitchen was the bathroom, a tiny little room sporting only a shower, toilet and sink. As she opened the windows to let the cool breeze blow away the stagnant air, she wondered briefly if it also could blow a little freshness into her life.

You've made a start, girl, she said to herself. She'd landed a job and a place to stay, at least for the time being, all within twenty-four hours of arriving in town. Not bad.

And speaking of not bad, her new boss would certainly fall into that category. Not only was he 'not bad', he was downright hot! Short brown hair that was probably as soft as silk, a matching moustache, bright blue eyes and a tight body. If Joe were in the market for a man, she'd definitely want to put him in her basket! Sweet, too. She giggled a bit as she remembered how his eyes had practically popped out of his head when she was knocking on the door.

Slowly, her grin dropped, and she sat on the bed. *What the hell am I thinking?* She needed a man like she needed a hole in her head. The last guy she'd met had practically torn the door off the hinges trying to get away from her after he'd seen her naked.

Dave had been a friend of her brother Bill, and the two had met at her family's annual Memorial Day bar-b-que. They'd hit it off pretty well and started dating. After a few platonic evenings out, nature had taken its course and, somewhere around the fourth date or so, the heavy necking had turned into serious petting.

Joe flopped back onto the bed, unable to stop the flood of painful memories.

"I want you," Dave had said.

"So what's stopping you?" she'd breathed.

That was all the encouragement he'd needed. He grasped her tightly to his hard body and bent her head back in a devastating kiss. She wrapped her arms around his neck, drawing him into her. It had been so long since a man had held her like this. She wanted to drown in his embrace. His tongue, at first gently then with growing confidence, explored her mouth. His hands on her legs pushed her skirt up, tugged at her silk panties. She moaned. Without allowing her mouth to leave his, she began to unbutton his shirt. Desperate, she needed to touch his skin, to feel his flesh beneath her hands. Awkward as teenagers, they had clawed and pulled at each other's clothing until they were both naked. Not bothering to go into the bedroom, Joe pushed him down onto her couch. He smiled up at her.

"Ride me, Baby," he demanded.

"Oh, yes," she agreed.

And ride him she did. She mounted him and began a slow dance. She could see the fire in his eyes as he watched her.

"Play with your nipples," he ordered.

Not bothering to answer, Joe ran her hands up her own tight stomach until her breasts filled them. She pinched her nipples slightly, encouraging them to erectness. Heat built deep within her, and she began to tremble.

"That's it, Baby. Keep it up. Come for me."

Her body blazed as waves of passion crashed over her. He reached up, grasped her tightly to his body, his hands on her hips as he forced her to fuck him deeply and rhythmically. Before she had finished, he flipped her over, his cock still buried within her. He pounded into her, thrust after thrust. She screamed when he tweaked her nipples, twisting them until the pain merged into pleasure. Suddenly, he collapsed on top of her, crushing her into his body. He growled his release into her neck, his body convulsing with pleasure.

For a long while, they lay next to each other, trying to catch their breath.

"I need to use the bathroom," he reluctantly admitted.

She rolled over to her side and reached for the lamp next to her bed. Without thinking, she turned the switch, and soft light filled the room.

"Holy Shit! What the hell is that?" he demanded, his voice horrified.

Joe shuddered, trying to shake off the sick sensation that flooded over her from the memory. Hadn't that incident taught her that the best thing for her was to keep people at a distance and concentrate on living her life and paying her debts? Blinking back tears and glancing at her watch, she decided she had just enough time for a nap before a quick shower and then down to work.

* * * *

Vincent glanced at his watch yet again. *Where is she?* he wondered for what seemed like the hundredth time. Just when he had decided to go upstairs and bang on her door, she calmly walked into the bar.

"I was starting to get worried about you," he said, noting with approval that she dressed sexy, yet respectably, in a pair of ass hugging Levi's, sneakers and a black, V-necked T-shirt which allowed just a peek of cleavage. She had added a touch of make-up to her green eyes and spiked her short, blonde hair.

"Don't worry yet, Mr. Milo. Like I said, I know my way around a bar, so all you have to do is show me your specials and give me a quickie layout of the place," she calmly assured him.

"Right," Vincent said. "First things first, though. Please, my name is Vincent—not Mr. Milo. Don't call me by my dad's name, Josephine."

Josephine laughed. "All right, then. I won't call you by your dad's name if you don't call me by my grandmother's."

"Pardon?"

"Josephine was my grandmother. She was a lovely woman with a quick wit and quicker backhand. I loved her and admired her above all other women but I'm not her. Everyone calls me Joe."

"Joe. I like that." He grinned. *Bet you're a lot like her*, he silently added.

"Good. Now, why don't you show me the ropes?" she said.

For the next thirty minutes, Vincent did just that. He showed Joe the recipe list for the Hot Shot Specials and how to work the dishwasher and the cash register. She was a quick study, he noted. Didn't say much, but kept an attentive gaze on him at all times. When he asked her to repeat what he had said, she did so without a fault. Finally, Vincent felt confident she could handle her first night.

"If you get swamped, I'll be around. I'm always around when there's a female bartender," he assured her.

"And why is that?" she asked.

"Safety."

Joe frowned. "You have much trouble around here?"

"No, but I want to keep it that way. Oh, around 11:30 or so a guy named Nathan will be showing up. He's the unofficial bouncer and my official best friend," Vincent said.

"Sounds good," she replied.

"I'll go flip the sign to open. Good luck." He reached over to pat her shoulder.

Without warning, Joe jerked away, her eyes wide and frightened.

"Hey, sorry, I didn't—" he began.

"No," she interrupted. "My fault. I just don't like people to touch me unless I'm expecting it." She quickly turned away, picked up a bar towel and began to wipe down the brass railing.

"I see that," Vincent said quietly. The girl had been hurt, he was sure of that. How and by whom, he didn't know, but he intended to find out. Something about her roused his protective nature.

As a few people began to straggle in, Vincent sat at a corner table, supposedly concentrating on paperwork and nursing a beer. In truth, he watched Joe joke with the customers. One man—Vincent thought of him as Brown Suit Guy—was a regular, but had never stayed past one beer. Tonight, though, Joe leaned across the bar and offered him a second. The guy had been coming in here for probably six months, had never smiled or, to

Vincent's knowledge, spoken to anyone. Vincent had assumed that Brown Suit Guy was stopping by for a quick beer before going home to his nagging wife and whiny kids. But now, to his amazement, Brown Suit Guy was laughing and nodded at something Joe had just said. Curious, Vincent meandered over to the customer's side of the bar.

"So, Joe, how's it going?" he asked.

"Just fine, Vincent. I was just telling Paul about a time back home when my brothers were sledding down a hillside and ended up in the neighbour's yard."

"Doghouse, more specifically!" Paul added with a big roaring laugh. "I would have loved to have seen that."

Joe gave Paul a wide smile. "Yeah. It was great. Being the youngest, I loved nothing better than watching the two of them screw up."

Vincent grinned as well and offered his hand to Brown Suit—ah, Paul. "Hi. I'm Vincent, owner of *Hot Shots*. You've been coming here for a while—just wanted to let you know I appreciate it."

"Yep," the man responded, shaking hands. "Name's Paul Maddin. Live on the other side of the river but work just down the road. Traffic's a bitch, so I like to stop by for a bit, let it thin out some. "

"Glad to have you. If you need anything, just let me or Joe know," Vincent answered, giving Joe a wink.

"Now that you've got a bartender with some brains instead of that twit who used to work here, I might bring some of my buddies from work, hang out a bit more. Hell, I bet my wife'd even like chattin' with Joe. Might be a nice night out this Friday for her," he answered then turned back to Joe. "So, how did those two get out of the doghouse?"

Joe grinned and continued her story. "Well, being the good sister, naturally I stood there and laughed. I tell ya, I'll never forget seeing those four legs stickin' out of that doghouse."

Pleased, Vincent wandered away. Hell, she'd been employed less than two hours and already was bringing in more customers. As the night wore on, Vincent became even more pleased. Customers were lined up against the bar, and two tables were full. Laughter and stories filled the air as people relaxed and enjoyed the evening.

Around 10:30, Joe got so busy that Vincent stepped behind the bar to help. With just eye contact and a head nod, Joe indicated she appreciated the help. Again, without needing to speak, Joe worked the door end of the bar while Vincent took the end closest to the lavatories. Together, they saw to it that the customer had whatever he or she wanted within minutes.

"Vincent, incoming!" she shouted.

Vincent's hands immediately came up, and he deftly caught the bottle of olives Joe just shot at him.

Grinning, he shouted back, "Little more warning, next time."

"Why?" a big burly guy on a stool asked. "You got it, didn't ya?"

Vincent laughed. "True, but I'm getting a little old. Reflexes are slowing down."

"Doesn't look like it to me," said the blonde babe perched next to the burly guy. To highlight her point, she blew a kiss in Vincent's direction. Joe and the burly guy burst out laughing, while the blonde looked at Vincent like she hadn't eaten in three days and he was a prime rib dinner.

"Oh my God! You should see the expression on your face, Vincent!" Joe high-fived the blonde, who now appeared to be a picture of innocence.

Vincent grinned again and, rather than take on two scary women, refilled the olive compartment.

* * * *

Joe enjoyed the busy pace. But as the late evening progressed to the early hours of the morning, the crowd thinned. By 12:30 a.m. or so, only two or three people flanked the bar.

"Hey!" yelled a strong voice from the doorway.

"Hey!" Vincent hollered in return. "Nathan, let me introduce you to Joe, the new bartender."

"Pleased to meet you," Joe responded, wiping her hand on a towel before offering it to the olive skinned, well-built giant. Nathan sported a sleek moustache and shaved head. Still, his brown, luminous eyes held secrets that any hot-blooded woman would love to discover.

"Same," he answered, his large hand completely engulfing her delicate fingers. "You look smarter than the last few bar wenches."

Vincent grinned. "He calls all my bartenders 'wenches'. Think nothing of it," he assured Joe. "But watch it, Nathan. The last thing I need is for you to offend her on her first night and have her run off."

"Hey, I've been called a lot worse by a lot better," she quipped.

Nathan threw back his head and roared.

"Vince, I like this one. She's a keeper."

"Yep. I think so, too. We've had the busiest Thursday we've had in a while."

Nathan glanced around the sparsely filled room and raised an eyebrow.

"Hey," Vincent countered, "what do you expect? People gotta work tomorrow."

Nathan nodded. "That's true. Glad to hear it was a good night, though."

"Got a question for you," Joe piped up, leaning against the bar.

"Shoot," Nathan responded.

"If it's usually a quiet night, why do you act as the 'unofficial bouncer'?"

Nathan laughed again. "That what he told you?" He looked over his shoulder at Vincent, who now was talking to their last patron. "Vince and I go way back. I grew up on the Hill, you know, where all the Italians live."

"I've heard of it," she said, encouraging him to go on.

"Vincent, he and his family moved in a few houses down from me when I was around thirteen or so. We've pretty much been friends since then. Live just around the corner, now, so Vince and I are still close. I'm a dealer over at the casino. Usually stop by for a beer before headin' home." Nathan peered over his mug at her.

"All joking aside, you look smart, but let me smarten you up even more, Blondie. By the way, your eyes are incredible, kinda like emeralds."

Nathan grinned charmingly, but Joe wasn't taking him up on the implied offer.

He continued in a more serious tone. "Vincent's got his own demons to wrestle. This place is his dream. His dad's a successful guy in this town. Does something with the railroad. His mom—stay at home June Cleaver type of person. Hell, she probably wears pearls to clean the damned toilets, know what I mean?"

Joe nodded.

"Anyways, Vince had this super important job, making money hand over fist, but it was killin' him, so he quit. Been tryin' to prove to his folks that he's made the right decision every since then. Hell," Nathan took a long swig of beer and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, "last time I went to Sunday dinner with him, all they did was rag on him about being a good provider, how no woman wants to be married to a lousy bar owner, yack, yack yack."

Joe looked up and watched as Vincent locked the door behind the last customer and flipped the sign to 'Closed'. She smiled a bit, hearing him whistle. *He looks happy, now, she thought. And sexy as hell.*

"I understand. And thanks," she told Nathan.

"Just tellin' ya, ya know." He grinned. "Vince! I'm outta here. I'll go out the back."

"Yep. See you tomorrow," Vincent answered.

"You know it!" Nathan responded as he walked through the office to leave by the rear exit.

"Wow! You did a great job tonight," Vincent complimented Joe.

"Thanks, but the night's not over," she responded.

Vincent looked confused again. She'd known him less than twenty-four hours, and already Joe could recognise that endearing expression.

"Clean-up, mister. Night's not over until everything's clean and back in place." She grinned as she rolled her shoulders.

"Nope. I'm on clean-up crew tonight. You go on up and get some rest. You've been rushed all evening, woman. You've got to be exhausted by now," he countered.

Suddenly, Joe realised he was right. She certainly was exhausted, and nothing sounded better to her than a hot shower and cool sheets.

“K,” she answered gratefully, “but I’ve got it tomorrow.”

“Deal,” he agreed, turning his back to her and grabbing three empty beer mugs.

When Joe snuggled beneath the cool sheets, she glanced at the clock—2:45 a.m. *Not bad, she thought. In town for a day and already have a job, a place to stay and one bad-ass, sexy boss as eye candy. What a deal!*

Chapter Three

Fuckin' Flying Fish

1 3/4 oz good quality gin

3/4 oz Triple Sec

1/4 oz grenadine

1 dash bitters

Put in mixer, add crushed ice.

Joe tipped her head sideways, allowing him access to her neck. She moaned as he nibbled his way down to the throbbing pulse at the base of her throat. He worked his way lower, blazing a trail with his tongue. She gripped the sheets beneath her when he flicked the tip of her nipple, lashing it to erectness.

"Please," she begged.

"Please what?" Vince asked.

"I can't think."

"Then don't. Just enjoy." He captured her pink bud with his teeth.

She yelped, enjoying the slight pain of the bite. He suckled, as if drawing pleasure from one breast while twisting and tweaking the other.

He raised himself above her, positioning his body for conquest.

"Vince, I..."

"Shhh. No talking. You're mine, now. I'll do as I wish with you."

Joe nodded. She felt trapped, helpless. A victim of his power and desire. She couldn't have been more aroused. She lifted her hips and felt the tip of his cock kiss her wet opening. He teased her, dipping in gently then pulling out. She tried to buck against him, but he pulled back.

"Patience. I'll fuck you, but when I'm good and ready. First, I plan on torturing you for a while. Now don't make me tie you up."

Joe's eyes widened. She'd never been tied up before, but the thought of it had her gushing sweet juices. Vince grinned, then, taking pity on her, plunged into her hot womb. She wrapped her legs around his waist, meeting each powerful thrust with her own. She clawed his back and felt his muscles tighten. She screamed out her joy as he buried his head in her neck. Still riding on waves of pleasure, she felt him raise himself and pull out of her. She cried out first in dismay but then in wonder as he painted her belly and breasts with his hot seed.

Joe finally dragged her body out of bed around 10:30 Friday morning. Running a hand through her limp hair, she quickly decided a shower was definitely the first order of business. Considering the dream she'd just had, a cold one would probably be best. Standing beneath the stinging needles refreshed both her body and mind. Not one to linger, she quickly scrubbed her skin and shaved her underarms, legs and pubic area, hopped out of the stand-up shower and towelled off. Humming to herself, she applied her favourite lotion, enjoying the lavender scent. When her hand reached her left shoulder, she hesitated, feeling the permanently wrinkled skin.

How long? she wondered. *How long before I can look at or touch myself and not remember?* Shaking off her sudden melancholy, she dressed simply in a pair of purple knickers, denim shorts and a bright purple T-shirt with the words 'Blondes do it Better' emblazoned across the front.

Padding into the kitchen, she opened a cabinet and pulled out a small coffee maker. Another plus about this place was that it came furnished. Sure, the dishes were a bit chipped, the flatware didn't match and the only usable skillet was cast-iron, but she wasn't about to complain. Hell, the pantry even came supplied with basics like coffee, flour, sugar, salt, pepper, a few spices and one unopened box of cereal. She'd gotten by with a lot less, before. With the knowledge that hot coffee was soon to be hers, she sat down at the small kitchen table and began to make a list of chores for the day.

First, she'd need to replenish some basic supplies like tampons, good coffee, milk and other necessities. Next, she'd need to call her folks and let them know her status. Then...

Suddenly, the shrill ring of her mobile phone interrupted her thoughts.

"Hello," she answered quickly.

"Baby Girl!"

Joe grinned. "Hi, Dad. I was just about to call."

"Sure you were, sure you were. Just checking in on you, not that I'm checkin' in," Henry Dunes assured her.

Joe's grin widened as she heard the deep baritone and signature repetition of her father's speech pattern. Through all life's trials, joys, desperations, triumphs and failures, Henry Dunes had stood solidly by his children. Not one to judge harshly, he encouraged his kids to be creative, independent thinkers. He represented everything a truly good person should be, at least in Joe's mind.

"I'm good, Dad, really. I've got a job and a place to stay, at least for the time being."

"Already? Man, that's a record even for you, Darlin'." His voice boomed across the line.

"What can I say? I guess I just fall in a pile of shit and come out smelling of roses," she quipped back.

Henry didn't bother answering, but Joe had to hold the phone well away from her ear as his vivacious laugh roared through the receiver.

"Good to hear, good to hear. Listen, Joe, I don't want to bother you, but Sarah's folks called yesterday," he reluctantly admitted.

Joe's heart contracted, and she suddenly became very serious. "What about?"

"Seems Cain's becoming more of a handful than they are comfortable with. Last week he got into some trouble at school."

"What kind of trouble? He's five, for God's sake," Joe said in exasperation. She closed her eyes and rubbed her head as she remembered Sarah. *Sarah*. After all this time, Joe still felt her throat contract as she thought of her. She and Sarah had been best friends all through middle and high school. Sarah, who stood by Joe no matter what. Sarah had tried so hard to please her upper middle class parents when all she really wanted to do was be an artist. Sarah, who had gotten pregnant after a one night stand six years ago and refused to name the father. Sarah, whose parents had thrown her out after discovering her 'shame'. Sarah, who...

Stop it! Joe told herself firmly. *It's Cain who matters now.*

Joe heard her father sigh over the airwaves before he continued. "That little scamp. Apparently, he didn't like the idea of the goldfish in the classroom being confined to a tiny little bowl so he decided to...well...liberate them."

Joe didn't bother to suppress the grin that tugged at the corners of her mouth. "Liberate?"

"Seems he took it into his head that the fishies needed a bit more room to swim, so he dumped them into a bag, tied it shut and ran out of school," Henry explained.

"Go on," Joe encouraged.

"You remember that the school is close to the lake, right?"

"Yeah." Joe could just imagine what Cain had done.

"Well, he dumped the little fishies into it, then he walked back to the classroom."

"That it?" she asked.

"Nope," Henry said baldly.

"I figured."

"He was whistling," Henry explained.

"Whistling what?" Joe noted with relief that the coffee had finished brewing and began to pour herself a mug.

"Sure you want to know?"

"Go for it," she answered, practically scalding her throat on the hot coffee.

"You remember that song you used to sing to him?"

"Oh, God."

"Yep. The Fish Head song," he confirmed.

Joe could almost see her father's smile as she took another gulp of coffee. She and Sarah had taken turns singing the song to Cain when he was a baby.

Fish heads, Fish heads,

Roly Poly Fish heads.

Suddenly, Joe saw the humour and had to giggle. Soon enough, both she and her father were laughing until they cried.

"Seriously, Joe," Henry said, suddenly sombre. "They're talking about sending him to boarding school."

"Like hell they are!" Joe shouted.

"Thought you'd take it that way, so I managed to talk 'em out of it, at least for this school year. Don't know about next fall, though. Never seen anyone resent their own grandkid the way those folks do."

"True. But then again, they are *raising* the kid, not just visiting." Joe ran a hand through her hair. "Thanks for the head's up, Dad. I'll start looking around here for good neighbourhoods, schools, that sort of thing. This is only September, so I've got a few months."

Joe and Henry chit chatted for a bit longer before finishing up the call.

Fabulous, just fabulous. Joe looked around the tiny apartment in exasperation. *Well, Sarah, at least I've got a new start. Hopefully I can make good on my promise soon,* she thought. Realizing that sitting around would not do her any good, Joe grabbed her purse and headed out the door.

Absorbed in her own thoughts, she didn't really notice the other people on the busy sidewalk until she walked smack into a human wall. If The Wall hadn't grabbed her shoulders, she'd have been flat on her ass on the sidewalk.

"Whoa, Joe," a familiar voice said. "Where you off to in such a hurry?"

"Sorry, Nathan. I guess I was in my own world," she answered. "Umm, you can let go of me now."

"What if I don't want to?" he smoothly replied, running his hands along her shoulders.

Joe went rigid. She saw the question in his eyes but chose to ignore it. Instead, she gave his hands a pointed glance. When he dropped them to his sides, she nodded her thanks.

"Guess we all have to do things we don't want to do," she said stonily.

Nathan laughed.

Joe relaxed. *Maybe this guy isn't so bad, after all.*

"Seriously, Blondie, where you headed?"

"I just need to pick up a few things. Figured I'd wander about until I found a store or something."

Again, Nathan laughed. "You're going to be wandering for a good long time. Closest one is about 3 miles from here."

"Good Lord! How do people in this neighbourhood get groceries and things?" she asked.

"Drive. Got a car?" he inquired.

Joe sighed. "Yeah. It's parked around back, but no air conditioning and next to no gasoline." *Damn*. She had some cash from tips last night, but probably not enough for her purchases and gas.

"What about the Market?"

"You mean the Farmer's Market? I'm not quite sure where that is," she admitted.

"Tell you what. I was going to shoot the bull with Vincent before heading to work in a few hours. But I need a few things, too. Why don't I walk with you?"

Joe considered. As a rule, she didn't hang with strangers, but Nathan wasn't exactly a stranger. Besides, he knew the lay of the land a hell of a lot better than she did.

"Sure. Thanks," she answered.

"This way, my lady." He bowed and reached out to touch her shoulder.

Without thinking, Joe jerked away and began walking in the direction he had pointed, ignoring his narrowed eyes watching her.

Having visited the area several times before, Joe was somewhat familiar with the buildings, but she'd only enjoyed the night life. Now, she smiled at the array of noises, smells and sights the Farmer's Market offered.

"I've always wondered why this area is called 'Soulard'. Do you know?" she asked Nathan.

"As a matter fact, I do. It's named after Antoine Soulard, a strapping Frenchman who did a bit of surveying work for the King of Spain back in the mid 1800s or so," he explained.

"A Frenchman working for Spain?" She raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah. Who'd have thought?" Nathan laughed. "Actually, this open Market is one of the oldest in the U.S."

"Really?"

"Yep. Julia Soulard, Antoine's widow, donated this land to the City of St. Louis. Then, in 1929, this building was constructed. Rumour has it that it was modelled after the Foundling Hospital in Florence, Italy," he continued.

Joe was fascinated. She loved historic buildings and the whole concept of continuing traditions.

"It's a wonder no one has tried to close it in or convert it into condos," she commented.

"Actually, a few years back there was a group who wanted to do just that," he said. "The people here, the sellers as well as the patrons, got a petition together, and the deal was dropped."

"I'm glad," Joe said.

"Yeah, me too," Nathan agreed.

Passing by a display of beef, Joe stopped to stare. "Okay, I've heard of some weird food before, but *fresh beef testicles*? Who the hell would eat that? I mean, come on, if you have a whole bull to eat, wouldn't you eat everything but that first? By that time, they sure wouldn't be fresh anymore!"

Nathan threw back his head and laughed so loudly that a few people turned to stare.

"My thought exactly! I'll stick with other St. Louis favourites like toasted ravioli or a nice brain sandwich," he responded.

Joe looked at him like he'd lost his mind. "I gotta agree that toasted ravioli is spectacular, but I'll leave the brain sandwich to you. Yuck!" She shook her head a bit, just imagining how to prepare such a concoction.

"Don't knock it 'till you've tried it. Vince's grandmother used to make a phenomenal brain sandwich, God rest her soul," Nathan said with a grin. "Really. Cross my heart. She removed the membrane first, then sliced it nice and thick, heated up some bacon grease in a cast iron skillet..."

"Stop already!" Joe begged. "Keep that up, and I'll become a vegan!"

Nathan laughed again but refrained from discussing the topic any more. Instead, he watched Joe select a few fruits and vegetables. She couldn't help but notice his furrowed brow when a stranger bumped against her back, causing her to flinch. Damn, all she needed was to start raising Nathan's suspicions.

* * * *

"So, I hear you spent the morning at the Market with Nathan," Vincent remarked as Joe strolled into the bar that evening. *Christ, she looks good.* He could just imagine her bent over the bar, her naked ass glowing with the marks of his hand, her thighs glistening with dampness. Quickly, Vince grabbed a towel and held it nonchalantly in front of his suddenly erect cock. *All I need now is for her to see Mr. Big and Hard. She'll think I'm some pervert.*

"Yeah, I'd never been there but plan to go back often. Nathan even gave me a quickie history lesson. Nice guy. Weird sense of humour, though," she added, shaking her head slightly.

"You don't know the half of it," Vincent said, a grin spreading over his face. "Did he point out the skinned and dressed coons?"

He laughed, noting the look of disbelief on her face.

"Guess not, but really, if you ever get a hankering for fried racoon for dinner, that's the place to pick one up," he assured her.

"I'll keep it in mind." Joe sounded hesitant and quickly turned to take an inventory of the stock.

Vincent continued to keep an eye on Joe as she set up for the evening rush. Dressed in painted on blue jeans, black T-shirt and sneakers, she again managed to look sexy but professional at the same time. Vince couldn't quite contain a sigh of disappointment as he noted the outline of a bra beneath the shirt, but even that addition couldn't quite hide her hardened nipples pressing against the material. *Maybe I should set the air conditioner down a bit more,* he thought deviously.

Tonight she had once more spiked her short hair, which showed off her black, crescent-shaped earrings. Those and a heart locket represented her only jewellery. *Simple elegance*, Vincent thought as he unlocked the door and turned on the 'Open' sign.

"Vincent, can I talk to you?" Joe asked.

"Anytime, Joe. What's on your mind?" *You want me to rip your clothes off and take you right now? How about if you lock your sweet, beautiful lips around my cock and suck me dry?* Vincent blinked innocently, hoping those last words were just in his head and not out there in the open.

"Why did you name this place *Hot Shots*?"

"I didn't. It came with it. Why?"

"When Nathan and I were walking around today, I noticed at least two other bars with almost identical names," she began.

"Yeah?"

"Well, let's say some guy, Paul, has a good time," she said.

"Paul?" he frowned then remembered. Brown Suit Guy. "Oh yeah, Paul."

"So he goes to work the next day and tells all his friends he had a great time at *Hot Shots*."

"I'm liking this scenario so far," he encouraged.

"Don't interrupt. But his friends go by one of those other bars and think that's the place he meant, so they go in and they have a good time *there*." Joe paused and looked at him, her eyebrows raised.

"I never thought of that," Vincent admitted. "You think I should change the name?"

"That's your decision, not mine, but you might think about it," she answered honestly but obviously not wanting to overstep her bounds as a new employee.

Watching her turn to greet the first customer of the night, Vincent followed her advice. Considering her words, he conceded she was right. Off the top of his head, he could think of at least three other bars with names that could easily be confused with *Hot Shots*, and that was just on the west side of the River. He had no idea how many of them lurked over in Illinois. But, if he were going to change the name, what would he change it to?

Makes sense to change it, though. Why in the hell haven't I thought of that before?

Research. That's what he needed.

I'll do a little research on bar names in the area, maybe a radius of thirty miles, and go from there.

Taking up his regular stool in the corner, he sipped a beer and watched as a few patrons strolled in. Joe greeted them and took their orders, all with efficient friendliness. As the evening wore on, a steady stream of people came in, singles as well as couples, but Vincent sighed as he realised that no one could say the place was packed.

Suddenly his ears perked up as he heard Joe say, "Naw, the sand tends to get into unpleasant places. How about I just fix that shot for you?"

Sex on the Beach. Seemed like lately a lot of drinks, especially shots, sported sexually charged names. *There's a thought.*

"Think fast!" a deep voice called.

Vincent raised his hands, barely catching the beer thrown at him. Good thing the manufacturer now made non-breakable bottles.

"Nathan, you're early tonight," Vincent grinned.

"Yeah, a bit. Got off work ahead of schedule and thought I'd come on in. How's Blondie doing tonight?" he asked.

As he popped open the bottle, Vincent's eyes strayed over to watch his new, sexy bartender. He frowned, noticing how the guy who had wanted the shot was leaning over the bar reaching for Joe.

"Was okay, but looks like she's having some trouble now," Vincent said as he started to stand.

Nathan turned around as well but put a restraining hand on Vincent's arm. "Give her a minute. See how she does on her own. If she needs help, I'm there, not you. It's what you pay me for. Okay, it's what you give me free beer for. Besides, I think she's got it under control."

Vincent nodded. She did seem to know what she was doing, but he wasn't about to just sit still and watch her get mauled by some drunk punk. Rather than sitting next to Nathan,

he wandered to the far end of the bar and sat on a stool. Nathan, he noticed, followed and took the stool next to him.

"Look, Big Guy, I'm not interested. I don't date, and if I did, I wouldn't date you. But I will refill your drink if you'd like," Joe said with a sardonic smile and a firm tone.

Apparently, Big Guy was an idiot, Vincent decided, because as Joe set another shot in front of him, he stood up and grabbed her wrist. Both Vincent and Nathan got to their feet, but Joe was quicker. With slow precision, she reached over with her free hand, grabbed a cocktail fork from the garnish bin, leaned on the bar and pressed the fork against Big Guy's crotch.

"Unless you want your boys impaled on the end of this and dangling from the rim of my boss's martini glass," she glanced over at him and Nathan, "I'd suggest you let go of my wrist and get a grip on yourself. Sometimes when a girl says 'Fuck off' she really means it," she delivered in a quiet but firm voice.

Big Guy got the hint that time, because despite the darkness in the bar, Vincent saw the colour drain from the man's face. Vincent grinned as the man nodded wordlessly, resumed his seat and downed his shot.

Joe smiled sweetly. "I thought you'd understand."

Both Vincent and Nathan sat down again and glanced at each.

"Told you she could handle it," Nathan bragged.

"Yeah, Yeah. I see that," Vincent agreed.

"You guys need anything?" Joe asked.

"Nope, we're good. And, by the way, so are you," Vincent complimented. "Kept your cool with that guy but were firm. Nice job."

Joe just grinned. "He's all talk. But, I did invoke your name. It helped having you and the big bouncer man here to back me up."

"At your service, Ma'am," Nathan said in his best Southern drawl. "Always glad to help a lady."

Joe laughed and walked away as another customer flagged her down.

"You know, I ran into her earlier today," Nathan began.

"Who?" Vincent asked, never taking his eyes off of Joe.

"Blondie."

"I heard. She said you had, and I quote, 'a weird sense of humour'."

"She was walking down Broadway trying to find a store to pick up some stuff. Gave her the guided tour of the Farmer's Market," Nathan answered between sips of his beer. "What's her story?"

"What do you mean?" Vincent frowned. Was Nathan interested in Joe? Damn, that would be inconvenient. Well, on second thought, maybe not. Vincent remembered a time when the two of them had shared a girlfriend. She had been a hot little brunette who later moved to Las Vegas. Before she had left, though, the three of them had enjoyed some wild and very fulfilling evenings.

Girlfriend? Now why would I put Joe in that category?

"I mean, why is she here? She's smart, pretty, quick on her feet. So why isn't she doing something else besides bartending?" Nathan asked.

"She grew up in a bar. Parents owned one up in Springfield," Vincent answered honestly. "Besides, nothing wrong with bartending as a career."

"True, but something about her just doesn't seem right." Nathan held up a hand when Vincent would have interrupted him. "Not in a 'she's demented and gonna gun everyone down' way, but it's more like she's carrying a heavy burden. One that might crush her someday if she isn't careful."

Vincent thought a moment and had to agree with his friend.

"Does she have an ex-husband?"

"Not that I know of," Vincent said, suddenly worried. "Why?"

"Probably nothing," Nathan shrugged and polished off the last of his beer.

"Nope. Can't do that. Can't say something like that then not follow through," Vincent reminded him.

"You remember Mary Sue Novack?" Nathan asked cryptically.

"Mary Sue?" Vincent racked his brain for a while then finally remembered. Mary Sue was a pretty little girl who had grown up in their neighbourhood. She was always perfectly

dressed, hair always in place, went to Mass every day. When she was sixteen, though, the whole neighbourhood had awakened to sounds of sirens as an ambulance and police car pulled up outside of her home. Apparently, Mr. Novack had been beating both Mary Sue and her mother for years, just not where anyone could see the bruises. That night, the ambulance carried away the body of Mrs. Novack and a battered teenage girl while the police car delivered Mr. Novack to a prison cell. Mrs. Novack's sister had moved into the house to care for Mary Sue, but the poor girl had never been the same.

"Yeah, I remember. Didn't she commit suicide a few years back?" Vincent answered.

"That's what I heard," Nathan agreed.

"So, what does she have to do with Joe?" Vincent asked, already suspecting the answer.

"Now, Blondie's only been here, what? Two days? So I could be way off. But I've seen her jerk away from folks a few times, almost like she's afraid a left hook is aimed for her," Nathan explained.

Vincent nodded. He'd noticed that, too. He gripped his empty beer bottle. No one, ever, had the right to abuse anyone, at least not in his mind. Catching Joe's friendly gaze, he nodded and smiled but resolved to keep a close eye on her and protect her if necessary.

"Got your back on this one, Vince," Nathan assured him.

Some of the tension drained from Vincent. He knew he could count on Nathan for anything.

Chapter Four

Ladies' Nightini

1 part gin

1 part vodka

1 dash vermouth

Garnish with lemon slice

"Vince, I need to ask you for a favour," Joe said a few weeks later.

"Course. What's on your mind?" Vince answered. *You want my body? You want me to bend you over that bar right now and fuck your brains out? Or would you rather I slowly strip your clothes off that luscious body, lick your nipples until you scream then make love to you for the next two hours?* Vince shook himself slightly, trying to focus on Joe's concerned frown.

"You okay?"

"Yep. Just a little distracted," he assured her. *Boy, am I!* Joe had worked for him for three weeks now, and with each passing day, Vince became more and more fascinated by her. Her quick, efficient movements entranced him. Her easy smile and hearty laugh reflected an open-minded and friendly personality. Vince couldn't be more infatuated than if he'd still been in high school and Suzy Jones, the head cheerleader, had smiled at him.

"Okay, well..." She rubbed her hands on her jeans in a gesture that he now recognised as nervousness. "I know we agreed that my living upstairs was just a trial, but I just talked with Renee and, well..."

Vincent's heart contracted just a bit. He had completely forgotten that Joe's living arrangement was temporary. Somehow, her staying so close to the bar—and to him—gave him great comfort.

"Is there a problem?" he asked.

"Well, kind of. Renee just got a notice that she has to move out for a few weeks while the landlords remodel the apartment complex. She forgot to tell me about it, so she's had to rescind her offer. So..." Joe glanced quickly at Vince's face before focusing on a spot somewhere over his left shoulder. "Would it be cool if, until I get on my feet, I just stayed and paid rent?"

Vince grinned. God bless landlords who remodelled. "I don't think that will pose too much of a problem at all. Actually, I kind of like knowing you're living there," he admitted.

"Really? Why is that?" She leaned her elbows on the bar.

They had been discussing the weekend's specials and checking supplies. Vince had to admit that her creativity and sharp sense of business impressed him as much if not more than her spectacular pair of breasts.

"Well," he began, "I like to know that my favourite bartender is safe, for starters. And, that apartment was kind of sad and lonely just sitting there empty. I like knowing it's being taken care of, lived in."

Joe nodded. "I get that. But, really, I need to start paying rent. I will not be a sponge."

"Fine. I'll take it out of your pay," he offered. "We'll both save a bit on taxes that way."

"Sounds good. Now that that's settled," Joe put on her business face, "have you thought about the name of this place?"

"I have. And you're right. We need to change it. I'm just not sure what to change it to," Vince admitted.

"I've got a few ideas if you'd like to hear them," Joe said with a wicked grin.

Vince sat on a stool and waved his hand for her to continue.

"What do you think of *Sexy Shots*, *Shot of Kink*, *What's Your Pleasure* or *The Cock and Tail*?" she asked.

"Interesting. Why?"

"Well, a lot of people are into shots now, and a lot of shots, as well as cocktails, have very sexual names."

"True."

"If we keep the *Shots* part of the name, it won't confuse the regulars or change the atmosphere too much. Still, we could play up the sexy part with our specials, redo the décor, even have sexually themed parties." The words rolled off her tongue, and Joe paced back and forth as excitement took control of her body.

Vince wanted to interrupt but was mesmerised by her energy.

"If you like *Cock and Tails* better, that kind of brings in an old world feeling but still implies sex," she went on. "We could keep Wednesdays as Ladies' Night but add a few things, like once a month host a sex toy party. Thursday could be lesbian night, Tuesday gay night, Friday for singles and Saturdays for couples."

"Wait a minute. You mean only let in singles, gays or couples on those nights?" Vince wasn't sure about that.

"No, no," she assured him. "Have some drink specials named after those themes. You know, like Sidecars for couples' nights, stuff like that."

She waited in front of him, bouncing slightly up and down on her heels, while he digested what she had just proposed.

"And did you know there are sex groups in the area that sometimes have trouble finding a place to meet? You could open your door to them, maybe even rent the place out on off nights for special events." Joe looked up at him, her eyes bright with excitement.

Vince considered. Sex did sell. Hell, the idea might work. He knew first hand about some of the sex groups. He and Nathan had attended a couple of parties a few years back. He'd never really wanted to be a 24/7 Dominant, but he had to admit he'd enjoyed administering a few spankings over the years. He grinned, remembering the relaxed, fun atmosphere of those parties – not to mention all the interesting people.

"Let's try it," he decided.

Joe let out a whoop, jumped up on the bar and twisted around to stand beside him. Instinctively, his arms went around her waist when she planted a victory kiss square on his mouth.

As soon as their lips touched, Joe felt an instant jolt of electricity. Suddenly, she didn't want to let go of him. Pulling back slightly, she looked at him and saw her own passion and

need reflected in his blue eyes. She had time to expel a quick breath before Vince dropped his head and once again claimed her lips. His arms tightened around her, and she lifted her hands to run them through his hair. Sure enough, it was as soft as she had imagined, but she didn't have time to dwell on that thought. Vince deepened the kiss, using his tongue to explore her mouth, his hands trailing a path of fire along her spine. Joe felt her body push against him as feelings long repressed began to surface. Her left foot, as if of its own accord, hooked around his leg. Vince made a sound deep in his throat, his hand slipping beneath her shirt.

Joe caught her breath and moaned when his fingers discovered her braless breasts.

Vince lifted his head, his eyes wide with surprise.

"Jesus," he muttered before lifting her top and capturing one pink nipple in his mouth.

Joe tipped her head back, fire radiating from deep inside of her. She couldn't breathe, couldn't think. All she could do was feel. His teeth gently nipped her tingling bud. Joe buried her hands in his hair, pulling him closer to him. He pushed her shirt higher up, his finger tips brushing against the bottom of her shoulder blades.

Reality crashed in on Joe like a flash of lighting. What the fuck was she doing? Suddenly, she pushed him away from her with surprising force.

"What the hell?" Vince exclaimed.

"Vince, I'm so sorry. I should never have let things . . ." she began.

"No shit. I never took you for a tease." His voice was raw with emotion.

Her eyes filled with unexpected tears. "I'm sorry."

Vince ran a hand raggedly through his hair and sighed heavily.

"God, Joe. Okay. I'm good now," he said more calmly, taking deep, ragged breaths.

Joe looked up at him.

"I'm the one who's sorry. Hell, I've wanted you since the day I saw you looking in that front window. I just let things get out of hand. Look, you're not going to quit on me now, are you?"

Joe smiled, hearing the slightly joking tone return to his voice. "Naw. Not this time. I won't even press sexual harassment charges. If I did, I'd probably just get possession of this

place, and until we make all the changes, it really isn't worth that much." She managed to grin at him, punching him in the arm.

Vince smiled somewhat shakily. "You're right, kid." Suddenly, his eyes turned serious. "Can I ask you something, though?"

Joe held her breath. She knew what he was going to ask and wasn't at all sure she was ready to tell him. Still, after what had just happened, the poor guy deserved some answer.

"Shoot."

"You promise to tell me the truth?"

"I try to tell the truth all the time, at least for important things that don't involve teasing my brothers," she answered.

Vincent actually grinned. "Good. Because even though I am your boss, I'd also like you to consider me your friend. And as your friend, I'd do anything I could to help you."

His eyes probed into hers, and she realised the honesty in his simple statement. She could feel her heart begin to melt, which scared the shit out of her.

"Thanks. So, what's the question?" she asked softly.

"Have you ever been abused?"

Joe frowned. What would make him think that? "No, of course not. If anyone had ever laid a hand on me, my brothers and father would have gone spastic. Besides, since I was at the bar so much growing up, they taught me how to take care of myself, as well. Why?"

"Just something Nathan said," Vince explained. "Don't worry about it."

Don't worry about it? Sure. That isn't going to happen.

Vince's expression cleared, and he reached out a hand to mess with her hair. "Now that we've got the shenanigans out of the way, what do you say we get to work on your new ideas?"

Joe smiled. "Let's."

"Hey," Vince said, his face suddenly lighting up like a Christmas tree, "what about CockyTails for a new name?"

Joe giggled. "Don't you think that's a little girlie?"

Vincent laughed. "Yeah, maybe. Let's go with *What's Your Pleasure* then for the moment. We can finalize it later."

Together, they worked for another few hours, and Joe ignored the quizzical glances Vince occasionally threw her way.

Chapter Five

Favourite Brother

2 part Kahlua

1 part vodka

Shot of heavy cream

Shake with ice, serve in martini glass.

"Hey Dad, good to hear your voice," Joe said, nudging the phone between her cheek and neck so she could continue to fold her laundry.

"Good to hear you, too, Baby Girl. Good to hear you, too," Henry answered. "Just checking up on you, Darlin'. Your mother worries."

Joe grinned. She'd just spoken with her mother the day before. "I know, Dad. How's everything going?"

"Just fine. Heard you were making some interesting changes at your place of employment," he continued.

"Now, Dad, have you been talking to Bill and Mike?" Joe knew she could thank her two loudmouth brothers for ratting her out to their father.

"Well, now, a father's got a right to know what his kids are up to, doesn't he?"

"Of course he does. And to answer your question, yes. Vince and I have been working on changing the image of the bar a bit," she admitted.

"Joe, honey. I want to tell you something. And I don't want you to be shocked, understand?" Henry's voice took on a serious note.

Unsure what to expect, Joe sat down on the side of her bed before answering. "Sure, Dad. Tell me anything."

"The boys said you're working on adding a sexy kind of theme to that bar of yours," he began.

"It isn't *my* bar, Dad."

"Don't interrupt. And they said you were a little nervous as to just what your mother and I would think about it."

"Uh huh."

"I just want to put your mind at rest, Baby Girl. We're behind you, no matter what you want to do," he said emphatically.

"Oh, Dad." Joe didn't bother to wipe away the puddling of tears in the corners of her eyes.

"As long as you're happy, we're happy. Besides, I've been in the bar business long enough to know a thing or two." Henry chuckled. "And to have seen and experienced a thing or two, as well."

"Ah—you don't really have to share everything with me," Joe urged, suddenly quite nervous.

Henry's booming laughter filled her eardrum, and Joe held the phone at a slight distance from her head.

"Don't intend to, Baby. Listen, I gotta run, but I just wanted to let you know, I'm proud of you."

As Joe hung up the phone, she realised how truly blessed she was. On the work front, Vince had changed the name of the bar to *What's Your Pleasure*, they had instituted Gay and Lesbian Night every Thursday and Fetish Night on the first Friday of every month. Business was better than ever. She had opened a savings account and, with the recent increase in tips, should soon have enough money to look into renting a bigger place so that by summer, she could make good on her promise.

Of course, that would mean moving and that would mean facing Vince.

Vince. Joe's heart beat a bit faster when she thought of him. Gorgeous, kind-hearted Vince. He'd not laid a hand on her since she'd freaked a few weeks earlier, and while she knew she should be grateful, she felt only longing. Lying back on the bed, she ran her hands over her body, remembering his touch, his scent. Her fingers touched her breasts, and she closed her eyes, pretending that it was his hand that squeezed her nipples. She tweaked harder, her peaks forming small mountains. Breathing harder, she reached down to finger

her clit, pulling and teasing it to full erectness. Imagining Vince's cock deep inside of her, she plunged two fingers into her wet tunnel. Continuing to rub her pleasure button with one hand, it took only a few moments for the feelings to build inside of her. Drawing Vince's image to her mind, Joe brought herself to full, shaking orgasm.

This isn't helping matters, she thought. If she kept this up, she'd end up so frustrated she'd forget her resolve and attack the man. And what an incredible man he was. Sighing, she ran a hand through her hair and wondered briefly if what she really wanted was for him to attack her.

A few minutes later, she walked into the bar, ready for work. Vince glanced up and waved but, since he was on the phone, he didn't speak to her. Joe got busy, writing the night's specials on the board.

"Hey, Blondie."

Joe smiled. "Hey, Nathan. You're here early."

"Yep. Got the night off, so I thought I'd see what was going on here. It's Fetish Night, isn't it? Thought you guys might need some help if it got busy."

"Always glad for the help," she answered truthfully. Nathan had turned out to be an unexpected treasure. Not only was his olive skin devastatingly attractive, his quick mind and sharp humour appealed to Joe. He offered her honest friendship typical of Mid-Western values which she willingly accepted.

The night proved eventful on a number of levels. For starters, a group of four leather clad men led by four leather clad women arrived around 8:30. Each man wore black leather pants, a chainmail shirt and a collar with a lead. The women wore an assortment of leather pants, halter tops, corsets and short skirts. They gathered around a table, with their men seated at their feet, sipping Cosmos and chatting away. Eventually, one man was allowed to order four beers for himself and the other men, but requested they be served in dishes which he placed on the floor. Joe watched in amusement as they knelt on all fours and lapped up their beers.

"Vince?" she asked.

"Yes?" Vince also watched the spectacle with a glint in his eye.

"That's not breaking any health codes, is it?"

“None that I know of. Besides,” he added, “looks to me like everyone’s happy.”

Joe grinned. Personally, she couldn’t imagine wanting a man to sit at her feet, but at the same time, she found the whole idea of submission strangely erotic and exciting. No time to dwell on it now, though. The bar was shoulder to shoulder with patrons, and every table was full. She laughed, joked and traded insults with folks while pouring beers, mixing cocktails and wiping the counters. These were the nights she loved the most—busy and vibrant. Glancing around, she caught sight of Nathan guarding the door and checking IDs and saw Vincent go into the back room.

Suddenly, the hair on the back of her neck prickled, and she scanned the room. She caught sight of him just before he moved in to grab her, his huge arms reaching over the bar.

Joe screamed, the man’s arms nearly crushing her ribs as he lifted her against himself and spun her around.

Nathan charged. Vince came flying out of the back room. Patrons squealed and mugs of beer went flying. Vince grabbed for Joe at the same time Nathan put his hand on the man’s shoulder and spun him around.

Surprised by the double attack, the man released Joe and swung at Nathan who ducked down. Vince pushed Joe behind him, grabbed the man’s left arm and twisted it behind him while Nathan neatly kicked the man’s feet out from under him. Within seconds, the man was face down on the ground, and stunned silence filled the room.

“Vince! Let him up!” Joe yelled.

“The hell I will! No one attacks you—not here, not anywhere,” Vince shouted, his knee firmly on the guy’s back.

“You’re going to hurt him.” She pushed both Vince and Nathan aside and knelt beside the prone man.

“Oh my God, are you okay?” She pushed on his shoulders, trying to turn him over.

The crowd of people looked on in amazement as the huge man rolled over, sat up and began to laugh.

“Joe, what the fuck is going on?” Vince demanded

Joe looked up at her angry, confused boss. “Vince, I’m so sorry,” she began, getting to her feet.

Vince opened his mouth, but Nathan put a hand on his shoulder.

"Guess I'd better introduce myself," the man said, gaining his feet. "I'm Bill Dunes, Joe's brother."

Vince felt the wind go right out of his anger. Brother? This giant of a man was her brother? He glanced at Nathan who had the audacity to be grinning and shaking hands with the guy. The crowd seemed pleased, going back to their drinks and conversations. Vince even caught the words 'sweet' and 'brotherly love'. Running a hand through his hair, he glared at Joe.

"Vince, I'm sorry," she said again. "I didn't know he was coming, or I would have been expecting it."

"Obviously," he answered dryly.

Joe blushed, and suddenly Vince felt sorry for her. Still, she'd scared the hell out of him.

"Vince, good to meet you, and sorry about the mess. How about I buy a round for everyone to make up for it? No hard feelings?" Bill announced to the cheers of the other customers. "And just to prove I'm a good guy, if you'll point me in the direction of a mop, I'll do the cleanup."

Now, how could he resent such a generous offer?

Vince accepted the man's hand. "No hard feelings. Just a misunderstanding. Welcome to *What's Your Pleasure*."

"Fine looking establishment. Interesting people, too." Bill looked around at the groups of patrons, his gaze lingering on a particularly pretty girl with sleeve tattoos and two nose piercings.

"Bill, be nice. It's Fetish Night. What are you doing here, anyway?" Joe asked as she returned to her side of the bar and began serving up beers. Vince joined her and worked the far side of the bar.

"Got the weekend off and thought I'd come down. I already booked a room, so don't start on me about staying with you." He grabbed his beer and gulped down half of it in one swallow. "Thought it was time I checked up on my baby sister."

"I'm fine, you moron. But it is good to see you," she admitted.

"Looks like you've got two protectors, kid."

Joe noticed the assessing look Bill shot at Nathan and Vince and smiled. "They're good guys, Bill. Leave them alone."

"Right," he answered.

"I mean it," she warned.

He pouted. "What did I say? I didn't say anything."

She laughed. "Go flirt with the painted princess who's making puppy eyes at you."

"Really? She is?" Bill almost spilled his beer turning around to grin idiotically at the girl in question.

Joe laughed again and got back to work.

The rest of the evening passed without incident. She and Vince worked the bar as Bill flirted with every woman in the room. He even spent a good deal of time chatting with Nathan. Now, why did that worry her so much?

Bill knew trouble when he saw it. He'd been around to pick up the pieces of his sister's heart ever since Bobby Mitchell first broke it when she was in the sixth grade. He grinned, remembering how he'd also broken Bobby's nose. Looking at her now, as she competently worked the bar and cast furtive glances in Vince's direction, he didn't see anything amiss. But he knew her well enough to know she was headed for trouble. *Might be time to do a bit of snooping.* Spotting Nathan sitting at a lone table, Bill grabbed his beer and meandered over.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked the handsome Italian.

Nathan gave him an assessing look before answering. "Sure, have a seat."

Bill sipped his beer, trying to decide the next course of action. He figured the best route was the direct one.

"So, is my sister falling for the owner?" he asked outright.

Nathan regarded him narrowly. "Could be. Is that a problem?"

"Only if you're falling for her," Bill responded, noting the quick frown on the other man's face.

"What makes you think that?" Nathan asked, quickly clearing his expression.

"Look. I'm a salesman, and a damn good one. Know why I'm good? Because I notice people. Their expressions, their eyes, their mannerisms. I notice if someone is leaning away from his or her date and chatting with someone else. I notice you rarely take your eyes off of Joe for more than a few minutes," Bill stated.

Nathan paused before answering. "You're a smart man, Bill. And, I'd say you really care about your sister. In your shoes, can't say I'd be any different. Truth is, Vince has a thing for her, and since he's my best friend, I'd never do anything behind his back. Just ain't right, you know?"

"Yeah, I can respect that."

"Still, she looks wounded, despite her sharp mind – and sharper tongue."

Bill threw back his head and laughed. "You got that right. That mouth of hers has got her in trouble more than a few times." Suddenly, he became serious. "As to the wounded part, that's up to her to tell, but let me just say, you're right on the money. She might seem tough, but she's vulnerable. She could use a friend, maybe some backup. Here." He pulled out a card. "Take that, and I'd appreciate you calling me if she needs anything, and I do mean anything. I'd also appreciate it if you kept this between us. Joe doesn't like Mike or me poking around her business, but hey, what's a brother supposed to do?"

Nathan grinned, tucking the card into his wallet. "Bill, I like the way you work."

"One more thing."

"Shoot."

"Baby Girl's got some demons. They're hidden real deep, but they need to come out. She's stubborn, but if you or Vince can break through and help her wrestle those demons, she'd be better for it. Do the girl good to find out she's not meant to be the strongest person in the room all the time. "

Nathan glanced over to see Joe wiping down the counter. Looking back at Bill, he nodded. "I understand."

Bill lifted his beer in a salute and downed the contents. Glancing back at Joe, he noticed her frowning at him. "Guess I'd best move along. Good chatting with ya." He reached over and shook Nathan's hand before walking over to end of the bar.

"What are you up to?" Joe demanded, her hands on her hips.

"Nothin', really. Just making a few new friends," he answered, the picture of innocence.

"Yeah. Right."

"I'm takin' off now, kid." Bill lifted her off her feet in a huge bear hug. "Gotta be back home late tomorrow morning, so I'm heading to bed. Probably won't see you tomorrow."

Joe wrapped her arms around him and hugged back just as fiercely. She never could stay mad at him for very long, especially when he shot her that silly, lopsided grin.

"Next time you come down, give me some warning, will you?" she scolded gently.

He set her gently on her feet and kissed her cheek before tossing a quick wave at Nathan and Vince and heading out the door.

Chapter Six

Heaven's Flame

1 shot rum

A dash of hot sauce

Allow the hot sauce to settle a moment before drinking in one gulp.

The heat blistered her skin, but she had to find him. Covering her mouth with the hem of her T-shirt, she dropped to the floor and crawled. His terrified cries escalated into hysteria. Finally, she was in his room. Using one arm to cradle him against her body, she began to crawl again, using memory to guide her to the door. Dark, heavy smoke obscured her vision. She heard a loud crack and curled her body around him, protecting him milliseconds before the flaming beam crushed her.

"Joe! Joe!" Someone was shouting.

Joe shook herself awake and stumbled to the door.

"Joe, let me in!" Vince yelled.

"Coming," she yelled back, fumbling with the lock.

She pulled the door open, wearing only the over-sized T-shirt she slept in, blinking against the bright sunlight. Suddenly, Vince's arms were around her, holding her tightly.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Why are you smothering me?" she answered, confused.

"God, woman. I was downstairs doing some paperwork and heard you screaming your head off." He held her at arm's length then pulled her back against him.

Joe's arms went around him as if by instinct. It felt so good to be held, comforted. It had been a long time since she'd been cradled in strong, masculine arms. She nestled her head against his chest.

"I'm sorry, Vince. I guess I was having a nightmare," she murmured.

"Look at me, Baby," he said. "It's over, now. I'm here. You want to tell me about it?"

Yes, Joe thought. I want to pour my heart out to you. Tell you everything. But I just can't do it. If you knew what kind of a deformed monster I really am, you'd hate me, fire me, never want to look at me with those beautiful, sexy eyes again.

"Thanks, but I'm okay, now," she assured him.

He looked down at her, and she could see the uncertainty in his eyes.

"Really, I'm fine." She smiled with a confidence she did not feel.

Vince ran a finger down her cheek and gently grasped her chin, lifting it. He dropped his head, his lips barely touching hers. Surprised, Joe opened to him, her tongue darting out to meet his. Vince made an animal sound deep in his throat and lifted her into his arms. Keeping her mouth trapped beneath his, he carried her to the bedroom and laid her on the bed.

Joe wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him on top of her. She could feel him struggling with his belt buckle and knew she should pull away. She felt him rise a bit, heard his shoes hit the floor, the metallic sound of his zipper.

I need to stop this now, she thought but instead lowered her arms to help push his jeans down.

"God, I want you," he whispered into her neck. "Take off your T-shirt."

Joe shook her head. "No, take me. Take me now," she begged, desperate.

Vince pushed her shirt up, capturing a nipple between his lips. Joe arched her back and dug her hands into his hair. The heat of his mouth seared her skin with passion's flame. No longer gentle, Vince sucked hard, causing Joe to cry out, whether from pain or pleasure, she didn't know or care. He switched to the other nipple, keeping the first one trapped within his fingers. He chewed and sucked on her tender flesh until all she knew was need. A gnawing, desperate need to be possessed by him, to feel him inside of her, to be fucked and fucked hard.

"Please, Vince. Please. I can't take any more. I want you inside of me! I need you now!"

"Whatever you say," he answered. "Just give me a second to find the condom in my wallet." Quickly, Vince rifled through his pants.

Joe stifled a laugh when he fumbled with the package and swore under his breath. Finally, he positioned himself over her and pushed his manhood against her folds, finding her already wet and hot. He entered her fully. Joe tightened her muscles, grasping him inside of her. He filled her completely. His heat combined with her own so that she wondered why they didn't spontaneously combust. She ran her hands up his strong chest, marvelling at the smoothness of his tanned skin. God, she knew it had been a long time since she'd had sex, but she didn't remember it feeling like this. If she died right at this moment, she'd die happy. Suddenly she remembered her dream. *Reality really can be better than fantasy*, she thought as she contracted and released her tunnel, milking his rod.

"You keep that up and I'll come," he warned.

"We can't have that, now, can we?"

With maddening slowness, Vince eased himself out only to plunge quickly back. She gasped and raised her hips, meeting each thrust, matching his rhythm. He tugged at her nipples with his teeth. She wanted more. Waves of heat washed over her. Her mind stopped all rational function and nothing, nothing in the world existed outside of the pleasure this man bestowed.

Grasping his tight, smooth ass, she encouraged him to fuck harder. Joe thought she would melt from the heat of him. She closed her eyes and let his power consume her.

"That's it, baby. Ride the wave," Vince commanded.

And what a ride it was! She screamed his name as her body trembled and shook. Something deep inside of her broke, and the ice she had carefully built around her heart began to melt. All time, meaning, mistakes, pain. All of it evaporated as she convulsed with exquisite pleasure. She dug her nails into his back and tightened her legs about him like a vice grip.

"Jesus!" he shouted before he gave one mighty thrust and emptied himself inside of her. He collapsed on top of her, rolling over, dragging her with him in a tight hug.

They lay panting for a few moments before Joe, unwilling to let this moment end, wiggled out of his grasp and kissed her way down his chest. She smiled when she heard him

moan, continuing her path to her destination. Carefully, she peeled off the condom to find his rod still dripping with precious fluid. She sighed with pleasure. She loved this. To savour a man's essence and clean his tool with her mouth was, perhaps, her favourite way to pleasure a man.

She cupped her hands around his balls and, using cat-like licks, lapped up the remains of his cum. Vince lifted his hips slightly, growled, and placed his hand on her head. She took him into her mouth, wrapping her lips tightly around his slowly shrinking penis. She sucked and licked, savouring his flavour, knowing she was giving as much pleasure as she was receiving. Again, she felt the muscles in her womb begin to quiver. When Vince reached down and dipped two fingers into her pot of honey, she exploded. Keeping him in her mouth, she rode out her orgasm. He finger fucked her until she went limp against him and rested her head on his abdomen, his now soft rod against her chest. For some reason, she wanted to serve this man. She wanted to give him everything.

"You are incredible," he whispered.

She blushed with pride.

He moved his hand to stroke her back. Suddenly, she felt him cease all movement, and her heart lurched.

"Joe? What's that?" he quietly asked.

Joe quickly sat up, pulling her T-shirt down to cover her body. "Nothing," she answered. "Don't worry about it."

He frowned. "If it's nothing to worry about, then why are you hiding it?"

Joe got up from the bed and began gathering clothes.

"Look, Vince. I don't want to talk about it. Okay?" She turned to face him. "Thanks for coming up here to check on me and all, but just because we enjoyed a good fuck doesn't mean I'm willing to bare my soul to you or anything, understand?"

Vince practically flew out of the bed, grabbed her shoulders and gave them a good shake.

"No, you understand," he ground out, his voice filled with anger. "We did not just enjoy a 'good fuck' as you so quaintly put it. There's something special going on between us, and you're putting up walls. I want to know why!"

Joe looked up at him, saw the pain and the anger in his eyes and knew he was right. There *was* something special between them, and she *was* putting up walls. But what else could she do? She did not have the luxury of fall in love, not now, maybe not ever. Best to nip this in the bud now.

Hardening her resolve, she laughed derisively. "Special? Look, Vince. I'm not going to lie, you were good. Very good. But just because we both needed to scratch an itch doesn't mean I'm ready to walk down the aisle with you."

Vince's eyes hardened, and he dropped his hands. "You're welcome to think anything you want, lady. But that doesn't change the facts. Which are simple. You have more than an itch that you want scratched, and if you think I'm so easily scared off by your smart mouth, you've got a lot to learn."

He placed his hands gently around her and drew her into him. She instinctively tipped her head back. He kissed her soundly and deeply. An earth shaking kiss which left her breathless and starry eyed. Reluctantly, he pulled back and stepped away from her, bending to retrieve his scattered clothing. Joe stood motionless, watching.

When he was dressed, he looked at her one last time and said, "And I'm planning on teaching you."

When she heard the door shut, Joe leaned against the wall and slowly slid to the floor, dropping her head into her hands and letting the tears flow. What on earth was she going to do now?

* * * *

"So what do I do now?" Vince asked Nathan. After leaving Joe, Vince had locked up the bar and driven over to Nathan's house. The two men sat sprawled on the couch, a bowl of chips between them, beers in their hands and football on the television.

"Let me get this straight. She was having a nightmare, screaming 'get it off me', you woke her up then fucked her. All was going good up to the point where you touched her back, then she freaked out," Nathan recapped.

"Pretty much," Vince answered. "She just did a complete turn around. One minute she was sweet and lovely, using her mouth the way it was meant to be used, then the next a self righteous bitch."

Nathan munched a chip before answering. "Seems to me the girl might need an intervention."

Vince frowned, confused. "What do you mean?"

Nathan proceeded to inform him of his conversation with Bill. "So, if you add all that to what you just experienced, I think we got a little girl on our hands who needs to face her past."

Vince nodded. It made sense. "Let me ask you a question, first."

"Shoot."

"How do you feel about Joe?"

Nathan hesitated. "Honestly?"

"No, Nathan, I want you lie to me." Vince punched him in the arm.

Nathan laughed, rubbed his arm and took a gulp of beer. "I could go for her. She's beautiful, sexy, smart. Got a sweet little ass that's begging to be spanked."

Vince held his breath and waited.

"But I'm not in love with her, like you." Nathan gave Vince an assessing look. "And she doesn't look at me the same way she does you. I got a hell of a lot of respect for that. Still, you ever want a third to join the party, like the old days, I'm the man for it."

"Thanks." Vince grinned. "And you're right. I think I might be falling for her."

"Ya think?"

Vince paused a moment, watching the game. "So, what kind of intervention did you have in mind?"

Chapter Seven

Bare Ass Spanking

½ shot peach schnapps

1 shot amaretto

1 shot pineapple juice

Shake with ice, pour.

Time for a bit of shopping, Joe thought as she perused her scant wardrobe. Tomorrow night, Vince had rented out the bar for a private wedding reception. Apparently, the couple was no ordinary couple. Not only would they legally marry, but the groom planned on collaring the bride during the reception.

Despite her need for independence, Joe found the idea of 'belonging' completely to one man appealing. To be able to trust another person so completely, to be free of making decisions, to be so devoted to another. Suddenly, Joe felt a familiar warmth spreading deep in her body, and an image of Vince standing naked in her room popped into her head.

Hell, she thought. I've probably blown all chance with him after the way I freaked out. I'll be lucky if he ever looks at me again.

Sighing, she grabbed her bag and headed for the stores.

* * * *

Standing in front of her mirror, Joe applied the last touches to her make-up. Then stepping back, she critically viewed her image. She had styled her short, blonde hair so it fell in loose waves above her ears, showing off her dangling, gold hoop earrings. The V-neckline of her sapphire dress was low enough to show a bit of cleavage, but not so low as to be overly sexy. As she swivelled her hips, the flowing hem of the dress swirled around her

knees. She smiled as she admired the gorgeous shoes. Since she would be on her feet all night, she had opted for sensible, two inch heels, but the tiny rhinestone ankle strap suggested mischief.

Thank God for Alicia, Joe thought. She had wandered for hours in various stores, unsure what to wear to such an event, so in desperation, she had called her cousin, Alicia Devonshire. Alicia had suggested something classy with just a touch of sexy. Alicia, who had moved to London three years earlier, had chosen an alternative lifestyle as a registered sex slave to her husband. After losing both of her parents and discovering her first husband was gay, Alicia had walked a hard road. In truth, when Joe had heard of Alicia's lifestyle choice, she had been appalled. However, after flying over to London for the wedding and meeting the handsome Maverick Devonshire, her doubts had been assuaged. Technically, he was Alicia's master, but it was obvious to Joe he also loved and adored his wife. Joe smiled, recalling the glow of contentment and joy on Alicia's face. She wished her cousin nothing but the best, but couldn't quite stop a slight stab of jealousy.

* * * *

Vincent had just finished carrying in the last iced bucket of sparkling wine. Bruce, the groom and an old friend from high school, had sprung for a locally produced vintage so all the guests could toast the happy couple. When Joe walked into the bar, Vincent almost swallowed his tongue. *Holy Shit!* The woman looked phenomenal in a dress.

"Hey, Boss Man, you already sipping the bubbly?" she asked with a twinkle in her eye.

"What? Oh, no, it's just that...you...um, you...well—" He broke off, cleared his throat and tried again. "You look beautiful."

She blushed.

Vincent's jaw dropped. Joe was actually blushing. Quickly, she turned away, straightening glasses and napkins. Vincent grinned. *So the lady doesn't know how to handle a compliment. Interesting.*

Joe busied herself behind the bar. Soon enough, guests began arriving. Vincent lowered the shades and put up the 'Closed for Private Engagement' sign. He manned the door, making sure only invited guests entered. At last, the place was filled.

The groom, dressed in a black tuxedo, positioned himself at one end of the bar. Joe wondered why a square of uncooked white rice had been arranged on the floor in front of him. Vincent stood beside him, holding a black velvet box. The other forty or so guests stood in silence. Joe could practically see the excitement sparkle in the air as the office door opened and Beth, the bride, stepped out. The white velvet cloak she wore completely covered her body. With her head bowed, she slowly walked to stand before her groom.

In one swift movement, he untied the beautiful garment, dropping it to the floor. Joe gasped. Wearing only a silver g-string, Beth knelt on the rice. Joe watched in fascination, not sure if she were more shocked by the ceremony or her own gathering excitement.

Beth remained kneeling on the rice, her head bowed, motionless. After several long minutes, Bruce held out his hand. Vincent opened the velvet box and lifted out a beautiful silver choker necklace and placed the delicate collar in Bruce's hand.

"By accepting my collar, you are accepting my dominance over you. You are accepting me as your Lord and Master. With our friends as witness, you proclaim yourself not only my lawful wife but my willing slave. Willing to obey my word, willing always to be honest, willing to accept discipline, share with me all your fears, all your desires. You do this of your own free will."

Beth raised her eyes to look at Bruce. She said nothing. She smiled and lifted her hair off of her neck. Bruce nodded, his lips twitched slightly, betraying his pleasure at her gesture. He clasped the exquisite collar around her neck.

Beth dropped her hair and held out her own hand. A woman whom Joe had not noticed before handed Beth a leather belt. Beth folded it and kissed it. She held it up as an offering to Bruce.

"By accepting this gift, my Lord and Master, You are accepting Your responsibility to train me as Your willing slave. With our friends as witness, You proclaim Yourself not only my lawful husband, but my loving Master. Willing to shower me with patience, structure and love. Willing always to be honest, to share with me Your desires, Your dreams. Willing

to discipline and teach me so that I may grow and we may share in a life of pleasure and joy. You do this of Your own free will."

Bruce reached down and accepted the belt. Beth kissed his shoes. Joe's eyes widened when Bruce snapped the belt three times. Beth placed her forehead on the ground before his feet, her hands on either side of her head, and raised her bottom. Using the belt, Bruce administered five deliberate lashes to Beth's backside. The sound of leather hitting naked flesh echoed throughout the otherwise silent room. Joe watched in fascination as five distinct red markings glowed on Beth's white skin.

"With the exchange of these gifts," Vincent announced, "and the acceptance of the first markings, this collaring ceremony is complete. If you will all hold up your glasses and give toast to Bruce and his newly acquired slave-wife, Beth? Long may they find their joy in each other."

Joe raised her glass along with the others, catching Vincent's eye, marvelling at how this unique ceremony touched her. She had witnessed a number of weddings, but none seemed as formal or heartfelt as this total giving of one's self to another. She watched Vincent's eyes darken. He tipped his glass in her direction before drinking his toast. Flustered, she automatically returned the gesture.

Bruce, rather than drinking from his glass, reached down to take Beth's hand. He helped her to her feet and held the wine to her lips while she drank. Only then did he partake of the wine, draining the glass in one gulp. Shouting triumphantly, he scooped his bride into his arms and swung her about to the cheers of the guests. Joe, shaking herself out of her fog, laughed and clapped along with everyone else then got to work.

* * * *

Later, after Bruce had bundled Beth back into her cloak, whisked her away to begin their honeymoon, and the last of the guests had left, Vincent began wiping down the tables. Joe kicked off her shoes and joined him in the cleanup.

"Ouch!" she cried, lifting her bare foot.

Vincent looked up. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Guess I should leave the shoes on. Just stepped on some rice," she answered, picking the grains from the bottom of her foot. "How on earth did Beth kneel on this for twenty minutes and not move or complain?" she mumbled.

Vincent, who had moved behind her, placed his hands on her shoulders. "She's disciplined," he explained. "The physical pain is a testament. An offering, if you will, to her commitment to Bruce."

Joe paused as if considering his words before responding. "You know, until recently, if anyone had asked if I believed in all this submissive crap, I'd have called it just that—a load of crap. But after watching the folks at the last fetish night and then this ceremony, I don't know." She turned and looked up at Vincent.

"I think..." She licked her lips before she continued. "I think I might be beginning to understand. I wouldn't be honest if I said I wasn't fascinated, watching today. When Bruce raised that belt, I thought I would be appalled, but I wasn't." She took a deep breath then plunged ahead. "In fact, I was wondering what it would be like to be in Beth's place. Just thinking about it, well, made me excited."

"You don't say," Vincent commented quietly, his hand tightening on her shoulders. *Keep her talking*, he told himself. "What else makes you excited?"

"A strong man," she admitted. "Not just physically, but a man who stands up for what he believes in, takes responsibility for his actions. A man who knows what he wants and isn't afraid to go after it."

Slowly, not wanting to scare her off, Vince ran his hands down her arms.

"Tell me more," he encouraged.

Her voice suddenly husky, she continued. "I haven't been with a man in a long time. I mean, discounting the other day with you."

"Discounting that," he mimicked, his hands reaching around to grasp her ass. Slowly, he lifted her skirt so he could touch bare skin.

She sighed and leaned against him.

His fingers probed around her silk panties, touching her outer lips. He hesitated, giving her time to protest. She didn't. Encouraged, he explored her moistened folds, finding her hooded button. He felt her tremble and shift her weight, opening her thighs. Smiling, he

flicked her clit then gently began to squeeze, tugging until it became engorged. With his other hand he explored deeper, rimming her tunnel. When he heard her sigh, he dipped first one, then two fingers into her honey. He massaged and manipulated until her juices ran down his hand, saturating her panties.

Vince lowered his head, nipped at her ear and whispered, "I'm going to fuck you, Joe. I'm going to bend you over the bar and fuck you until you scream."

"Yes," she murmured.

He laughed, a deep rumble in his throat. He spun her around, put his hand on her shoulder and bent her over the bar. He held her there as he unhooked his belt and lowered his trousers, deftly stepping out of them. Still pinning her to the bar, he grasped her sodden panties and pushed them to the floor. As if instinctively, she kicked them aside.

"That's it," he said approvingly. *God, she is beautiful.* Her deep blue dress pushed up over her hips, he bare ass shining with her own wetness, her body trembling with desire. Still, he wanted more.

"That's my girl," he crooned. He reached for the back zipper of her dress and began to tug. He wanted, needed to see all of her.

Joe's eyes flew open when she felt his hand on her dress. The icy water of reality washed over her, and she spun around, out of his grasp.

"What the hell?" he shouted.

"I'm sorry. I can't do this," she began.

"Like hell you can't!" he yelled, grabbing her by the arm.

"Vincent," she stammered, beginning to cry. "You don't understand." *How could you understand? I don't even understand.*

"Well, at least you got that part right," he agreed, giving her a quick shake. "But I'm going to understand, because you're going to explain to me,"

"No, please, just let me go," she begged. Joe cried in earnest now. She wanted to tell him. God knew she wanted to, but she just couldn't risk it. Vincent had sparked her heart and brought her back to life. What would she do if he cringed away from her in horror?

A loud banging on the door caused them both to jump, but Vincent did not let go of her arm.

"What?" he shouted.

"It's me, Vince."

Vincent looked down at Joe before answering Nathan. "You *will* tell me," he ground out. Keeping a good grip on her arm, he went to the front door, unlocked it and allowed Nathan entry. Then he shut and locked the door behind him.

"You remember that intervention we talked about?" Vincent asked, ignoring Joe's cries of protest.

"Now's the time?" Nathan asked.

"Now's the time," Vincent agreed.

"What are you two talking about? What's going on?" Joe demanded. Fear caused her voice to tremble.

"Looks like you lost your britches," Nathan noted with a grin, completely ignoring Joe.

"What can I say?" Vince answered.

Joe's struggles increased as the two men bantered back and forth. Whatever they had planned, she knew it couldn't be good.

Vince tried not to look at her. This had to be done.

"You want to do the honours, or you want me to?" Nathan inquired. "Gotta tell you, man, I'm a lot less involved emotionally than you, so I'd probably be harder than you."

"Good point. Fine, you do it," Vince agreed. Already he could feel his heart softening. He could see the fear in Joe's eyes, and all he wanted to do was hold her, tell her everything would be fine. He knew, though, that she'd never go for that. She'd just pull inside herself again, and he couldn't have that. He couldn't help her fight off her demons if she kept them hidden.

"Do what?" Joe demanded, her voice shaking with her rising panic.

"What needs to be done," he answered gently. "Joe, we can help you get over whatever demon is inside of you, but we need to know what's going on in your head. Will you let us help you?"

He watched her eyes carefully, noting the confused fury begin to subside.

"I'll fight you," she whispered.

He could see the longing, the uncertainty in her eyes.

"Will you fight me—or fight facing the truth? I—we—only want to help you, babe," he said. "Tell me now if you want this. Otherwise, I swear to you, I will never touch you again. I have never forced a woman to do anything, and I don't intend to start now," he promised quietly. Vince silently prayed she would agree to this intervention.

After a full minute, Joe looked up at him. "I want to tell you, but I just can't. I'm terrified," she admitted.

"Then trust me," he encouraged.

When she nodded, he kissed her.

"Joe, you'll be stronger and happier when we get through this. You're not alone. Nathan and I are here for you," he promised then glanced at Nathan.

Nathan flexed his muscles and placed a straight-backed wooden chair in the centre of the room. He sat on it, spread his legs slightly and said, "I'm ready."

"Ready for what?" she cried, her voice squeaking slightly, her eyes wide with renewed fear.

Rather than answering her, Vince dragged her over to Nathan. The man reached for her and pulled her across his lap, her skirt once again pushed up over her hips.

"You can't be serious," she babbled.

Vincent knelt in front of her, looking at her eye to eye. "You agreed to trust me, remember? If you really want us to stop, we will. But this is for your own good, and deep down inside, you know it."

"You bastard!" she yelled, kicking her legs wildly.

But she didn't tell them to stop.

"What are you hiding?" he asked quietly.

Resolutely, she clamped her lips closed. But he could see, beneath her defiance, her desperate desire to release demons, to confess, to be free.

Somehow, Vincent knew the simple threat of a spanking wouldn't be enough to help her break her silence.

He looked up at Nathan and nodded. He watched her eyes widen as Nathan's hand came down heavily on her white ass. She wiggled and squirmed, kicked and yelled, but Nathan's strong arm held her in place, and his broad hand rained down blows. When he felt she'd had enough, Vincent again nodded to Nathan.

Wiping away her tears, Vince questioned her again.

"What are you hiding, Joe?"

Maintaining her silence, she raised her head and glared at him.

He saw her need, but he also saw her fear and the stubbornness in her eyes. Vince sighed and glanced at his friend.

Again, the blows rained down on her now rosy ass. Standing up, Vince felt his cock harden. The sight of Joe's kicking legs and red bottom could not have been more beautiful. He felt a twinge of guilt hearing her cries, but knew he had to get her to open up to him.

"So what brought this on?" Nathan casually asked, continuing his assault.

"We were, as one would say, 'in the heat of the moment' when she freaked out," Vince answered.

"Like the last time?"

"Yeah, but more emotional."

"Interesting," Nathan commented.

When Joe's squealing diminished to sobs, and her rosy pink bum had shifted to fiery red, Vince knelt before her again.

"Wanna talk yet?" he asked, his hand on her head.

"No," she whimpered.

Vince nodded. "I knew those demons of yours had thrown up some pretty powerful barriers. But even if they won't let you talk, maybe they'll let you use your mouth for something."

Vincent stood, still grasping her hair. He felt her tense, readying her body for the next onslaught.

Positioning himself in front of her, he and Nathan exchanged a quick grin. Rather than continue with the spanking, Nathan began massaging her nether lips, stroking the petals of her flower. Obviously surprised, Joe tilted her head back and opened her mouth slightly – just the effect Vince had hoped for. Quickly, he slipped his hardened rod between her parted lips. Too shocked to resist, Joe opened wider, accommodating his length.

“I think she’s enjoying herself,” Nathan commented.

“Apparently you are, too,” Vince answered, watching Nathan plunge first one, then two, then three fingers into Joe’s tunnel. Feeling the warm wetness of her mouth and viewing her reddened ass, seeing her squirm against Nathan’s legs, proved almost more than Vince could handle. He felt himself grow bigger, harder. He knew he would explode soon, and he knew it was too soon. He thrust himself deep into her throat, forcing himself to ignore the gagging sounds she made. Feeling her throat relax against him, he pulled out.

Stoically, he stood over her, watching her head drop and tears splash the floor.

“Talk to me, Joe. Tell me what you’re hiding,” he demanded.

When she didn’t answer, Nathan pulled his hand out of her pussy and landed one hard, stinging smack on her abused bottom.

“When asked a question, a lady should answer,” he admonished. “You ready to answer, or you want the belt?” Nathan asked coldly.

“I’ll answer,” she whispered.

Vince and Nathan exchanged looks.

“Did you hear something?” Nathan asked.

“I’m not sure,” Vincent replied.

“I said I’ll answer, you bastards,” Joe shouted.

Relief swept through Vince. It had worked. She’d finally been able to break down her defences.

Nathan stood, grasping her around her waist, forcing her to stand, as well. When she looked up, her blue eyes awash with tears, Vince felt his heart melt. Only through supreme effort did he manage to keep his expression neutral.

"Go on," he encouraged.

"I'm ugly," Joe whispered.

Vince looked at Nathan and knew his own expression mirrored his friend's confusion.

"Come again?"

"I'm ugly!" This time she shouted it. "I've scared men away with my hideous deformity. There, are you happy?" She buried her face in her hands and wept.

Vince reached for her, intent on giving her comfort, but she pulled away.

"Not my face, my body," she insisted. "I don't want you to see me. I don't want you to run from me. I like watching your eyes when you want me, when you look at me, both of you," she sobbed. "But you, Vince, I think I could really fall for you. I don't want to do that again only to have you see me and leave."

"Oh, babe. I'm not going anywhere," he tried to assure her. *What the hell is she talking about?* He glanced at Nathan who, despite his first expression of confusion, seemed to accept what Joe was saying.

"Strip," Nathan coldly ordered.

Joe lifted her head in shock, her crying coming to an abrupt end. Even Vince was surprised to hear the authoritative quality in his friend's voice.

"Unless you want the belt," he warned.

"Nathan," Vince began, but stopped when Nathan held up his hand.

"It's the only way she'll get over this," he insisted. "Joe, you want to get through this like the woman I think you are, or do you want to chicken out and stop now?"

Vince looked at Joe, fully expecting her to slug them both. At the very least, he thought she would yell and scream. Instead, she bowed her head and nodded. Slowly, she reached around her neck and unzipped her dress. Taking a deep breath, she let the soft material flow over her shoulders and puddle on the floor around her feet.

"Turn around," Nathan commanded.

Vince watched in shocked fascination as Joe meekly complied with Nathan's order.

"Oh, baby," Vince whispered, his eyes drawn to the wrinkled, scarred skin covering her left shoulder blade and back.

"Good girl," Nathan praised her quietly.

Vince felt nothing but admiration for his friend.

Nathan placed his hand on Vince's shoulder and squeezed before slipping out the back door.

Chapter Eight

Love Shot

1 part whisky

1 part amaretto

1 part cola

Mix in a shot glass.

Joe trembled. She had heard Nathan's footsteps and the soft sound of the back door closing. His simple praise encouraged her, but still, she feared Vincent's reaction. She had been shocked by all three of them tonight. Her ass stung like hell, and she knew sitting would prove difficult for a day or two. Perhaps what had shocked her most, however, was the dampness running down her thighs. With each blow Nathan had inflicted, her arousal had risen and her resolve had weakened. She actually *wanted* to be told what to do, to be spanked, to be forced to reveal her secret. Now, fear crept up her spine as she waited for Vincent's acceptance or denial.

She nearly jumped out of her skin when she felt Vincent's hand touch her shoulder. She moaned when his tongue followed, anointing every wrinkle of her marred skin. No one, ever, had touched her in such a way. Still, she ached for his words.

He reached between her legs, gently pushing apart her thighs, forcing her to widen her stance. He dipped in his fingers, touching her honey. Suddenly, he pulled away. She gasped and tried to turn towards him.

"Don't move," he commanded, his voice carrying authority, his hand resting on her damaged skin.

Quickly, she again faced the bar, tears of frustration and fear forming.

"Do you know what I see?" he asked.

Not trusting herself to answer, she shook her head.

"I see the path of courage and a river of pain." He kissed the top of her shoulder. "A trail of beauty and suffering and strength."

She trembled, feeling one finger follow the hills and valleys of the scar tissue.

Again, he kissed her neck, worked his way down her spine. She felt herself tremble again, this time from pleasure. He pushed on her back, forcing her to lean over a table, her ass in the air. He continued his downward path, his tongue finding her dripping slit. Joe tipped her head back, her eyes closed. His mouth and tongue were so warm, so soft. He lapped up her juices, his clever tongue entering her pleasure tunnel. She could stand no more. Wave after wave crashed over her as stars exploded before her closed eyes. She heard a woman screaming and realised it was her. Just as she was catching her breath, she heard Vincent's low growl. Before she could adjust herself, he had both his hands on her shoulders, holding her in place when she would have stood.

"Stay put. I need to get a condom on," he instructed. Quickly, her found the foil packet, ripped it open and unrolled the protective latex over his shaft.

He entered her. Not gently, not harshly. He entered her with the determination of a man marking his woman. His momentum pushed her hips into the rough, wooden table. She stood on her toes, meeting him thrust for thrust. He moved his hands beneath her, grasping, squeezing her breasts, laying his head against her neck. No longer was she a bartender. No longer was she a woman of responsibilities, no longer was she a scarred victim. Her world spun around her, and she became A Woman. That was all, and that was glorious. She became A Woman conscious only of pleasing the man she loved, bending her will to his, offering her body, her soul for his pleasure.

His fingers dug into her breasts, and his pounding lifted her feet from the floor. Her mind spun wildly, completing her journey of joy as he shot his hot seed into the condom deep inside her womb. Completely satiated, he remained in place, his slowly shrinking rod encased within her warmth, his breathing ragged.

When she felt his heartbeat become even, he pulled out of her. Gently, he touched her shoulder, signalling her to face him.

"Joe," he said softly. "You are the most beautiful woman I have ever known."

Her heart clenched, and the tears that had threatened flowed freely.

He held her to him, "No, baby. Don't cry. You must know I've fallen in love with you. Your scars, your past. They don't matter other than to add to your mystique, your beauty, your strength. I love you, Joe. All of you."

"Vincent," she whispered into his chest. She didn't know what to say. Her heart was so full, she thought it might burst. She tried to speak, to tell him everything, but couldn't. Finally, she blurted out, "I love you, too."

Vincent smiled his big, happy grin, but Joe wasn't satisfied. She needed to *show* him how much she loved him. Looking up at him, she slowly sank to her knees.

"I am a strong-minded woman, and I have never submitted to anything like I did tonight," she began.

"Joe," Vincent interrupted, a frown appearing on his face.

She reached up and placed a finger over his lips.

"Please, let me finish."

He nodded.

"I was terrified. Not because of the spanking, but because deep within me, I knew I'd show you the scars. I knew you'd see them. I was terrified you would be repulsed."

Vincent shook his head and opened his mouth to respond, but Joe rushed on.

"But you weren't. Neither you nor Nathan. You accepted me, loved me, dominated me. I've never experienced anything like I did tonight, and I've never been so excited." She rubbed her cheek against his thigh, amazed at herself but also, finally, feeling accepted.

"Vincent, thank you," she stated before removing the condom and beginning to clean him with her tongue.

She heard his quick intake of breath and felt his hand on her head. She tasted his pungent juices clinging to his semi-hard manhood. Cupping his balls in her hand, she pulled him into her mouth, sucking, savouring, devouring him. Next, she began on his inner thighs. They also tasted tangy, this time from her juices. She licked them clean then continued down each leg, finally resting her head on his feet. Vincent bent down, lifting her arms so she again knelt before him.

"Joe, do you doubt that I love you?" he asked.

"No," she answered without hesitation.

"Did you enjoy being dominated?"

"Yes."

"Did you feel threatened?"

"No."

"Would you be my submissive?" he asked, lifting her chin so he could look at her face.

Would she? Was this what she wanted? Before she could begin to think logically, her heart answered.

"Yes," she stated strongly.

Vincent smiled at her, bent down and kissed her gently.

"In that case, go to bed, Little Joe. I have a lot to think about and arrange. If you're serious about this, remain naked in your apartment until I come to you," he commanded.

Joe nodded, stood and kissed his chest. He turned her towards the door, slapped her red arse to get her moving. Boldly, she walked up the back stairs completely naked and exposed to the night air. She entered her apartment and quietly shut the door behind her.

Leaning against it, she wondered what she had gotten herself into.

Chapter Nine

Bad Boy Shot

½ oz. vodka

½ oz peach schnapps

Shake with ice then strain into shot glass.

Hours later, Joe sat at her kitchen table nursing a mug of hot, sweet tea. Shortly after she had come up the stairs last night, more like early this morning, Vincent had stridden in. Together, they agreed to several conditions of their new relationship.

First, Joe was to continue working as a bartender. Vincent had made it clear he did not in any way want to control her entire life, just her sex life. Joe grinned, remembering how he had intimated that Nathan might well become a third partner on occasion. Her heart beat just a bit faster, envisioning Nathan's swarthy good looks. Still, any time she felt uncomfortable, she was to tell Vincent. They would either talk through it or stop things completely.

Joe wiggled on the wooden kitchen chair, her bottom still sensitive, her pussy nearly raw and her thigh muscles sore. She smiled to herself. She'd never felt more satisfied.

Suddenly, the blaring of her phone interrupted her happy thoughts.

"Hello?" she answered.

"Aunt Joe?" a tiny little voice sounded.

Joe's heart stopped. From the sound of his voice, Cain was crying.

"Hey, baby. What's wrong?" she asked, her voice softening.

"I was bad again, and Grammie and Pa said I had to call and tell you. They said I'd be lucky if you ever wanted to see me again," he sobbed.

Joe shook her head. What awful thing could a little boy have done that warranted such harshness? Not for the first time, Joe wondered how such selfish, cold hearted people could have raised such a compassionate daughter as Sarah.

"Cain, calm down. I love you, I will always love you. We'll work through whatever has happened, so just tell me what you did," she encouraged.

She heard sniffing for a while and Grammie's stern voice mumbling in the background.

"I runned away from home," Cain admitted.

Joe's heart nearly stopped. "Why? Are you okay? Did you get hurt?" A million terrifying images rushed into her head.

"I just wanted to see you, but I got lost. I'm sorry," he sobbed.

"Oh, baby. Don't cry. I'll come see you soon. I promise," she assured him.

"Yes, I've heard that before," Mrs. Hett's cool voice answered.

"Mrs. Hett." Joe took a deep breath, still hearing Cain crying in to background. "Let me assure you that as soon as I can afford a bigger place to live, I will arrange for custody of Cain, just as I promised Sarah."

"And when, exactly, will that be?" the woman harshly demanded. "Because I never agreed to raise this child."

Joe gritted her teeth. "I'm very well aware of that. Please, if you would just put Cain back on, I'll see what I can do."

"Fine."

"Aunt Joey?" Cain snuffled into the phone.

"Hey, Big Shot. I need you to do something for me. Okay?"

"Sure," he answered.

"This is really important, so I really want you to try hard," Joe encouraged.

"I'll try."

"You've got to promise not to run away again. Grammie gets worried when you do that, and so do I."

"But I miss you."

Joe heard the crack in his voice.

"I miss you, too, Cain. How about if I come up to see you next weekend?" she suggested.

Immediately, Cain brightened. "Can we go to the swimming pool?"

"Oh, Cain, of course we can. We'll stay at the big hotel and swim every day! Then we can cuddle up on the big bed and watch movies together. "

"Yippee!" he shouted.

"I have to go, now, but remember, I love you." She pressed a kiss into the phone before hanging up.

Standing to take her empty mug to the sink, she slammed into a man's chest. She screamed, dropping the mug. It shattered as it hit the linoleum.

"Oh my God! Vincent! You scared me to death." She put her hand on her heart to stop the erratic pounding.

"Who's Cain?" he demanded.

"What?" she asked, disoriented.

"On the phone, you said you loved some guy named Cain." He crossed his arms and glared at her. "Come on, Joe. It hasn't even been twenty-four hours since you said you loved me, and now you're mooning over some other guy?"

Joe's blue eyes turned to ice. "I don't 'moon' over Cain, you moron. I fell in love with him almost six years ago, on the day he was born."

Vincent's mouth dropped open, and Joe felt some gratification to see the red creeping into his cheeks. Joe retrieved a dust pan and broom from the linen closet and began to clean up the mess.

"Joe, I didn't know. I just assumed," he babbled.

"Yeah." She whirled towards him, shaking the broom handle. "You assumed that I was a slut."

"No." He backed up, his hands in front of him trying to block her. "I've never heard you mention Cain before. I didn't know. I'm sorry."

Indignant, Joe finished with the cleanup and slammed the broken ceramic pieces into the rubbish.

Whirling to face him, she felt tears form in her eyes. "And so you thought the worst of me, didn't you? Let me tell you something, buster." She poked a finger at his chest. "That little boy means more to me than anything else in this world. The only reason I came to St. Louis was for him. He needs a fresh start."

"What?" Vincent asked.

Joe saw the confusion on his face and sighed. She felt the anger seeping out of her. He deserved to know.

"Sit down, Vincent. You ready to hear my life story?"

Vincent nodded warily and sat down at her little table, directly across from her. Joe took a deep breath and told him everything.

She told him how she and Sarah had grown up together. Sarah's parents had never approved of Joe, who came from the wrong side of the tracks. They both worked for the state, and Mr. Hett had inherited a fortune from his family's coal mining business. Joe's parentage simply did not stand up under scrutiny. None of that had mattered to Sarah, though. She had calmly told her parents that Joe was her best friend, always would be, and if they didn't like it, they could just go fuck themselves.

Eventually, the two girls had rented an apartment together. Sarah had met the love of her life, or so she thought at the time. When the bastard found out she was pregnant, he'd cut out of town, and Sarah had never heard from him again. Her parents were livid. They had disowned her, but Sarah hadn't cared. When Cain had come along, Joe had changed her work schedule to days so Sarah could work nights. That way, one of them was always with the baby.

Joe clasped her hands tightly before continuing. "Then, three years ago, I lost my best friend, and Cain lost his mother."

Vincent sat silently. She appreciated that. If he had made a move to comfort her then, she would have broken down.

"Sarah wasn't feeling well. She had cramps and a headache, so she called in sick at work. I went out when I got off for a drink with my boyfriend at the time. When I got home, it was obvious Sarah had been crying. She'd just spoken with her mother who had told her

once again how disappointed she was in Sarah. We talked for a bit before I went to bed. I woke up around two in the morning.

"The smoke detector was buzzing, and I smelled the smoke. I heard the crackling of the flames. I jumped up, didn't even think about what I was doing and ran to Cain's room, grabbed him, wrapped his blankets around him. I cradled him in my left arm and dropped to the floor so I could crawl out of the building. The whole place was filling up with smoke, and I could barely see where I was going. Cain was screaming, and I knew I had to get him out of there. I almost made it to the door when the ceiling collapsed on me."

She heard Vincent suck in his breath, but continued her story.

"I don't remember much after that. The next thing I knew, I was in the hospital in the burn unit. Cain, thank God, had escaped injury of any kind. Apparently, a fire fighter pushed open the door right as the ceiling fell, and he got us both out of there pretty quickly."

"Oh, baby," Vincent whispered.

"Sarah didn't make it. She had lit a candle then fallen asleep. Later, we found out the candle had ignited the curtains, and that's what started the fire. I stayed in the hospital for months while they did skin grafts on my shoulder. I was lucky. Nothing vital was hit, and after several months of physical therapy I regained full use of my left arm." She ran a hand through her hair and looked directly into Vincent's kind eyes. "Despite that, I was a mess mentally. My parents suggested I move back in with them, which I did. I helped out in the bar when I could. Finally, I went to a psychologist who really helped me work through things.

"Sarah had written a new will that made me guardian of Cain under the condition that I was financially stable. Until then, Mr. and Mrs. Hett have custody of him. They were good with that for a while. I guess they truly mourned their daughter. But now Cain is asserting some independence, plus they want to travel again, not be saddled with an active little boy." Joe reached out and touched Vincent's hand.

"I just couldn't stand being in Springfield any longer, though. Too many memories. I figured a fresh start would be good for me and Cain both. So, as soon as I can financially swing it, I'm going to rent a bigger place in a good neighbourhood close to a good school, and then Cain will come live with me."

There it was. Now Vincent knew everything. Not only was she damaged, but she had a child to think of, as well. Silently, Joe prayed she hadn't lost him.

She should have known better.

"So, what time next Saturday do we leave for Springfield?" he quietly asked.

Chapter Ten

Head shot

½ oz raspberry liqueur

½ oz Southern Comfort

Shake with ice, strain. Pour into shot glass.

Joe blinked at him. Was he serious? If they both left, who would run the bar? Did he really want to meet Cain?

"I came up here to tell you I think we should hire some more people," Vincent began.

"Can you afford that?" she asked, her brain quickly switching gears.

"I can now. To help with scheduling, I'm going to hire two part time people, and Nathan said he'd be willing to work a few hours a week, as well. That way, we can take time off together," he assured her.

"But can you get someone so soon?"

"Sure. Nathan can cover Saturday, we're closed Sunday. No problem," he said as he pulled her into his arms. "We'll plan on leaving Saturday morning."

* * * *

Saturday morning arrived with a chill in the air and the smell of snow. Joe smiled. She loved snow. Sure, the roadways could be quite hazardous, but the beauty of the whiteness spoke to her. Having already packed for the short trip, all she had to do was eat breakfast and dress in a skirt and a bulky, brown sweater. Twenty minutes later, she was seated in Vincent's four wheel drive Jeep.

"I made reservations for the hotel on the edge of Springfield. It has an indoor pool with an arcade right next to it," she informed Vincent.

"How many rooms?"

Joe blushed. "Just one. They were pretty well booked up, but there are two double beds, and I thought you could take one and Cain and I share the other."

Vincent reached over to lay a hand on her leg. "That sounds good. I want to get to know this kid. From what you've told me, he's one special boy."

"He is," Joe assured him, smiling. How on earth had she lucked out enough to find a man as sensitive and adorable as this one?

"Since we won't really be alone, however, I think it best we make the most of our time in the car," Vincent said.

"Okay," she answered hesitantly, unsure of what he meant but recognising the commanding timbre of his voice.

"Are you wearing panties?"

"Yes."

"Take them off," Vincent commanded.

Joe blinked once then did as he bid. Vincent did not even glance at her, simply taking it for granted she would obey him.

"Now the skirt."

"But..." she began to object.

"Now," he stated, a hard edge to his voice.

Glancing nervously at the passing traffic, Joe complied. This time, Vincent did spare her a glance and a quick nod.

"Now, open the glove compartment. You will find a small, cordless bullet vibrator. I want you to insert it then hand me the controller."

Joe followed instructions, opening the glove compartment and finding a shiny, silver vibrator. She didn't worry about being wet. The moment she had opened the door to Vincent that morning, she had felt herself soften and moisten. After inserting the device deep within her pussy, she obediently handed Vincent the controller.

He began gently, building intensity until Joe felt her muscles contract. She tipped her head back, knowing she was on the brink of orgasm. Suddenly, a large semi truck pulled up beside them and honked. Joe squealed and quickly bent over, trying to cover herself from the leering driver.

"No, you don't," Vincent warned. "If he wants to look, he can look. Let him see how beautiful you are. You don't cover yourself unless I tell you, got it?"

Joe nodded and hesitantly glanced up at the grinning trucker. Apparently, the man radioed his friends, because within minutes, five other trucks were lined up to get a good look at Joe's squirming body.

Vincent pulled the Jeep into a rest area, and Joe reached for her skirt.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Well, I need to use the restroom, and I can't very well walk in there half naked," she answered.

Vincent raised an eyebrow. "You think you can just put on your clothes without permission or earning that privilege?"

"Oh," Joe murmured. "You're right. May I put on my skirt?"

"Not until you've sucked me off."

Joe grinned and quickly reached over to unzip his jeans. Without further instruction, she licked the tip of his penis, savouring the sweetness of his pre-cum juices. She rolled her tongue around his shaft before opening her mouth wide and devouring his length. Closing her lips over him, she sucked gently and moved her head steadily up and down. Vincent placed his hand on her head, playing with her hair.

God, he tastes good. She'd given head quite a bit in her time, but no one had ever tasted as sweet as Vincent. She could suck on him all day. Suddenly, he pushed her head down, her lips hitting his pelvis, his body shaking. Joe greedily swallowed his hot load, feeling the liquid fire slide down her throat. When he relaxed his grip a bit, she hungrily lapped up all the remaining cream, purring like a satisfied kitten.

"Nice," he complimented. "Now you can put on your skirt, but make sure it comes off again as soon as you get back."

"Yes, Sir." She flashed him a wickedly satisfied grin.

* * * *

Vincent glanced at Joe sleeping peacefully in the passenger seat. For the ride home, he'd ordered her to remove not only her skirt and panties, but her sweater and bra, as well. In deference to the chilly weather, though, he had allowed her to drape a thin blanket over herself. When he had noticed her eyes becoming heavy, he had told her to lean back and take a nap. Now, one corner of the blanket had dropped a bit, revealing the curve of one luscious breast. Vincent cast an appreciative glance at it before returning his attention to the road. He could get used to having a naked woman with him.

For the most part, the weekend had gone beautifully. Mr. and Mrs. Hett had dropped Cain off at the hotel within half an hour of their arrival. The rest of the day had been filled with playing in the pool, challenging the little scamp to games of Asteroids and Space Invaders and eating disgusting, kid-appropriate food before Cain had fallen asleep with his head on Vincent's shoulder. That was when Vince's heart had flipped over. He hadn't been able to resist dropping a quick kiss on the little boy's head before tucking him into bed. He felt a warm, cosy sensation stealing over him as he remember how Joe had looked this morning, snuggled in bed, wearing flannel pyjamas with little Cain curled against her. After stuffing their faces with pancakes and bacon, he and Joe had taken Cain shopping to replenish his supply of socks, underwear and toy race cars.

His hands gripped the wheel a bit tighter as he thought about Mr. and Mrs. Hett.

He and Joe had driven to their home to drop off Cain. The boy had tearfully hugged Joe and even thrown his chubby arms around Vince's neck before leaving. Mrs. Hett had done little more than huff at the boy and shout at him to put his packages away before slamming the door shut. Was it possible to fall in love with a little boy in just twenty-four hours? Vincent wasn't sure, but he knew that he'd do all he could to help Joe make a warm, loving home for him.

Chapter Eleven

Bad Habit

½ oz. vodka

½ oz. peach schnapps

Shake with ice, pour into shot glass.

"So, when will we meet this paragon of virtue?" Eileen Milo probed as she placed a basket of bread on the table.

"Soon, Mom." Vincent had dreaded this. Sunday dinner with the family. He'd missed it last week since he'd taken Joe to Springfield, but there was no escaping two weeks in a row. At least he'd been able to beg Nathan into coming with him.

"Soon, he says," Eileen admonished. "He's thirty years old. When you were his age, Anthony, you had a house, a wife and a child. Does he think time will stand still for him?"

"Now, Eileen, give him a chance. He needs to establish that business of his before he can even consider supporting a wife," answered Anthony. He glanced at his son and shrugged.

Vincent knew Eileen's greatest joy was her son, and her greatest disappointment was that he was the only one. She had dreamed of having a large family, a house filled with children. Sadly, after the very difficult birth of Vincent, she had never been able to conceive again. Now, she lived for grandchildren.

"I'm right here, Mom. You can talk to me, you know," Vincent countered.

Eileen took her place at the end of the table and glared at her son. "I'm just pointing out that you're not getting any younger. And neither am I, for that matter. I'd just like to live long enough to bounce a grandchild on my knee. That's all I'm saying."

Vincent rolled his eyes as he watched his mother blot hers with a napkin.

He glared at Nathan who barely suppressed a giggle. What was it about coming home that turned them both into little boys again?

"Actually, Mrs. Milo," Nathan began, "I think you'll really like Joe."

"And why is that?"

"Well, for starters, she don't take no crap...uh...I mean, she doesn't let anyone walk all over her."

"Well, a woman has to stand up for herself," Eileen acknowledged. "If she can stand up for herself, she can stand up for her children."

Suddenly, an idea struck Vincent. Rather than blurt anything out right there at the dinner table, though, he waited, listening as the conversation turned away from his personal life to local gossip.

When dinner was finished, he stood and offered to help his mother with the cleanup. When she demurred, he insisted, telling her she worked too hard and he wanted a little time with her, anyway.

"Since you put it that way, how could a mother refuse?"

When they were in the kitchen, Vincent approached her with his idea.

"Mom, I have a favour to ask," he began.

Eileen set down her dish cloth and gave her son her full attention.

"Joe has a son, sort of," he stammered.

"Perhaps we should sit," Eileen offered.

Vincent grinned. She must have known he'd been perturbed throughout dinner. After all, she couldn't have raised him without knowing his habits. When he had dropped his fork not once, but twice, she must have known something serious was on his mind.

As he sat across from her at the Formica kitchen table, she held onto his hands.

"Now, tell me all about it," she encouraged.

Vincent told his mother everything, almost. He told her of first meeting Joe, of falling in love with her, of the fire, of Cain. Carefully, he refrained from mentioning anything about Joe's surprising submission to him. Eileen remained silent, absorbing all he said.

"So here's what I was thinking, Mom. The house on Russell Avenue, is it still vacant?"

"Yes, it is. The last renters moved out about two months ago, and we haven't had anyone interested in it since then," she answered.

From the expression on her face, he knew she was guessing the direction of his thoughts.

"I know this sounds stupid since I've just met Cain and I haven't really known Joe that long, but I love them, Joe and Cain both. That house is in a good neighbourhood, and Cain could go to St. Michael's School in the fall. Joe would still be within easy driving distance of the bar, and I could switch her hours around so she could be home with Cain when he gets out of school," he explained.

"Vincent, I think it's a wonderful idea, not stupid at all. I know it's fast, but did I ever tell you about how fast your father and I fell in love?"

"No, I don't think you did," Vincent admitted.

"We met at a Friday night Fish Fry, and by Sunday afternoon he had asked me to marry him. Whirlwind romances can end badly, my boy, but sometimes," his mother smiled secretively, "whirlwind romances last forever."

Coming back to the present, Eileen looked carefully at her son. "Have you mentioned any of this to Joe?"

"I thought I'd surprise her," he proudly admitted.

Eileen gave him a stunned look before she threw her head back and laughed. "Son, you have no idea what you are in for!"

* * * *

"Keep your eyes closed, honey," Vincent said as he guided Joe into the house on Russell Avenue. His parents had purchased this place years ago with the idea of reselling it. Just after they'd gotten it fixed up, though, the housing market had crashed, and so they had decided to keep it as rental property. Vincent had always loved its cottage-like feel and had often thought of moving in. But with three bedrooms, a living room, three bathrooms, a

dining room and finished basement, it was just too big for one person. He would have felt its emptiness. This was a house which should be filled with noise and people, a family. Now, he might just be able to have all that.

"Okay," he said, positioning Joe in the centre of the living room, "you can look, now."

Joe laughed, her eyes slowly opening. Vincent carefully watched her face as she turned in a circle, eyeing the room speculatively.

"Well, what do you think?" he asked.

"It's lovely, but I don't understand why you brought me here," she admitted.

"Joe, this is where we're going to live," Vince explained quickly. "Look, here's the master bedroom, the kitchen is in here, and down the stairs is a full, finished basement complete with its own bathroom. Plenty of room for all of Cain's toys! It's already furnished, so we won't even have to worry about buying anything right away." He dragged her from room to room, pointing out the wonders of each.

Suddenly, Joe understood his excitement. She felt the heat rise to her face as first anger then fury overtook her senses.

"Hold on there, Big Guy. You think that you and I and Cain are going to live here?" she asked indignantly.

Vincent blinked in obvious confusion. "Why do you sound mad?"

In exasperation, Joe threw up her hands, barely missing Vince's head. "Because I *am* mad, you idiot! You really expected me to jump up and down and say 'thank you, kind sir'?"

"Well, yeah, kind of," Vincent admitted sheepishly, reaching his arms out to hug her.

"Well, guess what?" Joe shouted, pushing him away. "I don't need you or any other hero in my life. I can take care of myself and of Cain, too. I've almost got enough money to start looking for a bigger place so I can move him down here once school gets out. You might be my sexual dominant, but I make my own life decisions."

"But don't you see, this is the perfect arrangement for us," he cajoled.

She poked a finger at his chest. "I make my own arrangements, and I don't appreciate you taking it for granted that I'd just hop onto your Instant Family Train." Her anger burned so hot that she barely noticed Vince's eyes darkening.

"Listen, Joe." He grabbed her hand. "If you poke me one more time, you're going to be sorry."

"Oh, you think so?" she taunted, poking him with her free hand.

"That's it!" he shouted.

Before she could blink, Vince grasped the back of her head and pulled her against his chest. His head came down on her lips, crushing them beneath his onslaught. Gone was all gentleness. This was a primal, savage kiss designed to intimidate and dominate.

Joe felt her anger melt in the blinding heat of passion. She wrapped her arms around his neck and moulded her body into his. How could she stay angry with him when she couldn't even remember her name?

Without removing his lips from hers, Vince tore at her clothing. Joe heard buttons pop and felt fabric rip. She didn't care. She began clawing at Vince just as earnestly. When he had torn her blouse off of her, he broke the kiss only to drop his head and capture a nipple with his teeth. Joe threw her head back and moaned. The pleasure-pain of his assault on her tender buds had her legs quivering and her juices flowing.

"Fuck me," she begged.

Suddenly, he released her nipple and scooped her up in his arms. He carried her to the bedroom and dumped her on the bed. Roughly he removed first her shoes then her jeans and panties.

"Not yet, little girl. First, I need to teach you a lesson. I told you not to poke at me."

Joe's eyes widened as he whipped off his belt and folded it in half, slapping the leather against the palm of his hand.

Joe's mouth watered. "Are you going to use that on me?" she squeaked.

"That was my plan. Seems I need to break you of a bad habit. You got any objections?"

Joe shook her head and gulped. Already her thighs were sticky with anticipation.

Vince reached down and rolled her over. Joe cringed and bit her lip as she heard Vince snap the leather together. She knew this was going to hurt, but damned if she wasn't trembling with excitement. Without realising what she did, she tensed her ass muscles, bracing herself for the first blow. She heard the sing of leather and felt the bed beneath her jerk. Curiously, she felt no pain, so she glanced over her shoulder at Vincent.

He stood there, his chest heaving, the thick, black belt in his hand, a sardonic smile on his face.

"Surprised?" he asked.

"Yes," she acknowledged. "I thought you were going to..."

"Did I say you could turn around? I'm your Master. I'll beat your ass or not as my pleasure warrants. Right now, I want you to keep your face to the bed. You are not to look at me. Sometimes I'll hit the bed, sometimes you. My choice. Understand?"

"Yes," she said as she whipped her head back again. Her senses jumped as he once again snapped the leather and hit the mattress next to her. The third swing of the belt, though, smacked her bottom, and she howled, not so much from pain as from surprise. She knew he had lightened the power behind the stroke that smacked her ass, but still, the sting of the leather brought tears to her eyes and moisture to her pussy.

Over and over again, he tortured her. She never knew if the bed or her ass would be the target for the next swipe, and the disorientation left her breathless. She thought she'd go mad. Finally, she heard him drop the belt and unzip his pants.

Without thinking, she rose on her elbows so she could turn to him. Catching herself, she stopped and quickly dropped back down.

"Not quite quick enough, my naughty submissive. Good thing I brought a few supplies. Stay put. I'll be right back," Vincent ordered.

Struggling to control her breathing, Joe luxuriated in the burning sensation of her bottom and wondered what else was in store for her. Soon enough, Vincent came back into the room. She heard a jar open and felt a cool gel between her ass cheeks. Vincent slowly began to rub it down the crack, fingering her rear door.

"Oh my God," she moaned.

"That's right. Time for a little ass fucking. You ready for this?" he asked.

Joe felt his finger enter her puckered hole and cringed a bit at the tightness. Already her legs had begun to quiver as her excitement built.

"I've never done this before," she admitted.

"Doesn't answer my question. Are you ready to try this?" he asked again.

"Yes," she cried out. "Yes, please. Just fuck me. Please, please fuck me. Anywhere you want. I need to feel you inside of me."

Vincent laughed deep in his throat. He continued to push one finger slowly into her dark tunnel. Joe tensed at first, her body readying itself for a sharp pain. When it didn't come, she relaxed, and Vincent added another finger, stretching her. Joe moaned. Yes, there was a bit of discomfort, but it only added to the spice of the sweet sensations stealing over her.

"That's it, baby. Just relax," Vincent encouraged.

"No!" Joe cried out when he pulled his fingers free, feeling bereft without him.

"Easy, now. Let me get this condom on, and I'll have you full and satisfied in no time," he assured her.

True to his word, a moment later she felt the tip of his penis pressing against her quivering hole. She reared up as his width stretched her even farther than his fingers had. She was sure she'd split in two.

"Relax," he crooned, gently stroking her back. Slowly, with infinite care, he eased himself into her warm body. "That's it."

Joe answered only with her pants and moans. She felt as if she would spit apart. She trembled as the exquisite pain morphed into pure pleasure. She had never felt so full, so used, so utterly taken. Firmly grasping her hips, Vince began rocking himself in and out. Lightening bolts of electricity seared every nerve with beautiful sensation. She began to buck against him, matching his rhythm.

"Good girl," he encouraged, thrusting harder into her.

Again, Joe reared up, but this time Vince didn't stop her. Her body shook with tremors, and she cried out as she rode the wave of ecstasy.

"Ride it, baby. Don't stop!" Vincent's breathing became ragged. He pumped into her faster, now, each stroke more determined.

Joe felt him lengthen again and clenched her muscles tightly around him, milking him to his own fulfilment.

Finally, he collapsed on top of her, his weight nearly crushing her. Joe didn't mind. She closed her eyes, wanting to savour this feeling for as long as possible.

Suddenly, her eyes popped open. She could feel him shrinking, still encased in her body. This subtle movement brought new quivers of tender joy. She squealed as he slowly slid out of her, sending jolts of electricity throughout her body.

"Oh my God, Vince. That was incredible," she sighed.

Vincent rolled off her and pulled her into his arms. He kissed the top of her head. "Couldn't agree with you more, my dear. Are you very sore?" he asked, one hand rubbing her still hot cheek.

Joe wiggled her bottom, aware of a lingering heat. "A bit. But it was so very worth it. Can we do it again?"

Vincent laughed loudly. "Count on it, babe. Count on it."

* * * *

"Bet that went over like a lead balloon," Nathan laughed, stretched out on his couch.

Vincent had dropped by his friend's place to watch the game and had told him about showing Joe the house.

"Yeah, you could say that," he answered.

Nathan cast an appraising eye at Vincent before saying, "Can't believe you didn't get hit."

It was Vincent's turn to laugh. "Almost. Let's just say we came to a mutual agreement."

"And what would that be?"

"End of next month, Joe will have enough in savings for the first month's rent and deposit. She's going to move in. Then, at the end of May when Cain is out of school, she'll get

custody of him, and they'll live there. Being here for the summer will give him time to adjust and make a few friends before school starts in the fall," Vince explained.

"And you?" Nathan pushed.

"Me? I'll stay at my place but be a regular visitor at hers. We'll see how the ball spins. Hate to admit it, but she's right. We should take things a bit slower, especially where Cain is involved."

"Probably wise. So, what's on the agenda for tonight?" Nathan asked as he stretched and yawned.

Vincent grinned. "Thought you'd never ask."

Chapter Twelve

Surprise!

1 part vodka

1 part sour apple schnapps

1 part spiced rum

Mix in a shaker with ice. Pour into high ball glass over ice.

"This surprise better not be like the last one, Buddy Boy," Joe warned, wagging her finger in mock warning.

"This one, my beautiful little submissive, will be wonderful. This surprise lasts only for the night. Ready for the rules?" he asked, grinning.

Joe felt the heat rising from deep within her body. Early in the afternoon, Vincent had called and asked her if she wanted to have some fun that evening. Always up for a bit of a frolic, she had eagerly agreed. He'd told her to dress casually but to wear no underclothing. Now, seated in his car in front of his apartment, she wiggled a bit in anticipation.

"Shoot," she answered.

"First and foremost, rule number one is you let me know if you are not comfortable or you want to stop. Agreed?"

"Agreed," she acknowledged. Once she had believed that a submissive was little more than an unwilling slave. Now, she knew that just like in any loving relationship, the submissive had just as much power as the dominant. Vincent was always careful not to push her too hard. Sometimes, she almost wished he would. Just last week, she had been bent over his lap receiving a delicious over-the-knee spanking. Without warning, he'd stopped, telling her that her ass was red enough. She'd begged for more, but he was adamant. He did not want her bruised, and if he had continued, she would have been. Thinking about it later, she

realised he was right. She didn't want to be bruised, either. Good thing Vincent always watched out for her.

"Rule number two. You keep the blindfold on until it is taken off you."

"Got it."

"Rule number three. Once we get inside, you will remain completely naked until we leave."

Joe blushed and nodded her head. Vincent did not seem at all concerned about her scar. In fact, he often ran his fingers and tongue over the ridges, soothing and caressing her damaged skin, but she still remained self conscious.

"Rule number four, and this one may surprise you, so tell me if you're not okay with it," he said, holding her hand next to his heart.

"I will." She smiled at this wonderful man, her thighs beginning to tremble.

"There is another man waiting in the living room. I plan on sharing you with him, but if you prefer, he can simply watch or leave. Both he and I will respect your decision."

Joe felt a moment of terror. Another man? Was he nuts?

"Who is it?" she asked.

"That's part of the trust I want you to have in me as your dominant. I'm not going to tell you, and you will remain blindfolded. But believe me, Joe, if I didn't believe in this man's integrity, I'd never let him get within ten feet of you," Vincent assured her.

Slowly, Joe nodded her consent. If she truly wanted to be a submissive to Vincent, she had to learn to trust him more. It helped, of course, knowing that she had the final say in all things. Seeing the pride in his eyes, Joe knew she had pleased him with her answer.

Vincent got out of the car and walked around to open her door. This simple act of chivalry still warmed her heart. He helped her out of the red Jeep and, holding onto her elbow, walked her up the stairs to his apartment. Before sliding the key into the door, he slipped a blindfold over her eyes. Joe felt a moment of panic, but her excitement soon overrode her fear. She heard the door open, but he stopped her when she put a foot forward to walk inside.

"Strip," he commanded.

Startled for a moment, Joe hesitated.

"Trust me," he whispered.

Gulping down her embarrassment at the thought of one of his neighbours walking by, she unbuttoned her blouse and let it drop to the ground. She kicked off her shoes before unbuttoning and unzipping her favourite pair of blue jeans. Having followed his earlier directions regarding no underclothing, she now stood completely nude in the hallway of Vincent's apartment building. Rather than feeling humiliated as she had anticipated, she felt liberated. Her confidence soared, and she stood tall and proud, waiting for further instructions.

"God, Joe," Vincent murmured, "you're incredible."

"I'd have to agree," said a deep voice.

Joe smiled. *Nathan*. She should have known this was the man with whom Vince would share her.

Feeling Vincent's hand on the small of her back, she walked into the room. This was a dream come true. How many nights had she fantasised about both Vincent and Nathan? How did Vincent know? Would he be jealous? If he were, then why would he initiate this ménage?

She heard Nathan rise from the sofa and walk over to her. He ran his hand along her face and grasped the nape of her neck, tipping her head back. His lips, warm and strong, descended on hers. His tongue pushed her mouth open and began its assault. Joe melted under his power. Vincent was a strong man, but also had a slow and sensual touch. Nathan was pure power. She leaned against him and felt his arms go around her. He lifted her, carrying her to the dining room while continuing to kiss her senseless.

Only when he gently laid her on the table did he raise his head, breaking the contact with her mouth. She felt his breath on her neck and heard him whisper, "Tonight, you are ours, Blondie. But know this. I will stop if you want me to. Don't care what I'm doing, if you want to stop, say the word. I want you to enjoy this as much as Vince and I plan to."

Joe nodded, too overwhelmed to speak. Suddenly, she jumped. Something cold was dripping on her chest. Ice?

Vincent laughed. "You're frowning, little one. Trying to figure out what I'm doing?"

"Yes," she said breathlessly.

"Nathan and I are in the mood for ice cream. You're the bowl," he explained. "Try not to wiggle, or the whipped cream will slide off."

She was the bowl? She felt something cold plop between her breasts and something else on her stomach. She yelped a bit when another cold plop landed on her Mound of Venus. Within moments, she felt a cool drizzle of something thick and sticky dripping along her body, then heard the fizz of whipped cream being squirted.

She moaned, recognising Vincent's warm tongue slowly licking her cream coated breasts. She held her breath and tried to count to ten. The coolness of the topping contrasted with the warmth of his mouth in a senseless whirlwind of sensation. The ice cream wouldn't last long. Her body burned with excitement, a fire growing deep within her belly. When Nathan's tongue lapped up the quickly melting treat on her mound, she jumped, reaching out her hand to grasp Vincent's hair. She had to touch them. They were giving her so much, she needed to give to them.

"Not so fast. You don't have permission to touch. You have to just lie there and take your tongue lashing like a good girl," he said.

Joe could have screamed from frustration. She couldn't touch them? She just had to passively lie there? *Oh, God. I'll explode!*

As their tongues quickly lapped up the cool treat, her own honey began to flow. Her nipples, responding to both excitement and cold, became hardened peaks. She felt teeth tweaking them. She squirmed and wiggled, wanting more.

"Oh!" she sighed as strong fingers gently played around the wet rim of her tunnel. "Please," she whispered.

"Please what?" Nathan asked.

"Please fuck me," she begged.

Both men chuckled.

"Hey, Vince, I think some ice cream dripped down here," Nathan observed. "You want the honours?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," Vincent answered.

Joe cried out and arched her back. Vincent's tongue gently flicked her cold but elongated clit. He twirled his tongue about it, apparently licking off every drop of cream. He grasped her nub with his teeth, nipped and then suckled. Joe couldn't help herself. She reached down, splayed her fingers in his hair and pushed her pussy against his mouth. She wanted him to devour her, to consume her whole. Fireworks cascaded as her mind went blank. She become not a human but an animal controlled by a primal need, a need she could not live without. Within moments, the sweet, sweet, joy of release filled her, and she screamed out her joy. Vincent lapped up her juices while Nathan again captured her mouth in his. Joe thought she'd died and gone to heaven.

When the waves passed, she reached up to remove the blindfold. Nathan quickly caught her hand.

"Not so fast, Blondie. You stay blindfolded until we remove it," he corrected.

Joe, remembering this rule, blushed.

"Right now, I think a little cleanup is in order," Vincent stated.

Without warning, Vincent picked her up and carried her into the bathroom, standing her upright in the shower. Joe gasped, surprised at the force of the needles of water hitting her skin. Used to much lower water pressure, the sting of the jets thrilled her. The temperature of the water, though, was perfect. Not too hot and not too cold. She heard someone step behind her and felt strong, calloused hands working soap into her back. Nathan. Soft hands rubbed sweet smelling lather over her breasts. Vincent. Could life get better than this?

The two men worked their sudsy hands over her body, into her hair, carefully keeping the blindfold in place. They massaged and rinsed every part of her. Cleansing, purifying. She could have drowned in the sensations. She stifled a sigh of disappointment when the water turned off and Vincent helped her out of the shower and enveloped her in a warm, fluffy towel. She held her arms out, allowing the men to rub and pat her dry.

Vincent grabbed her damp hair and pulled her head back. He kissed her long, deep, his sensuality transforming the centre of her being. She lost herself and became his.

Then she became aware of Nathan rubbing fragrant oil into her shoulders, over her scarred skin. She tensed. His hand hesitated a moment then continued. Slowly, she relaxed. If

Vincent wanted her naked, so be it. If he wanted her scars exposed, she'd expose them. Besides, Nathan had seen them before, yet he still wanted to touch her. She sighed, leaning into Vincent as Nathan continued down, anointing her back, buttocks, legs.

With obvious reluctance, Vincent broke free of her lips and released her, turning her around so Nathan could massage oil into her legs, stomach, arms, breasts. Had Vincent not held her upright, Joe was sure she would simply have melted onto the floor.

Gently, Vincent ushered her into his bedroom.

"You want it rough or easy?" Vincent asked.

"I want it all," she answered.

Nathan laughed, loud and boisterous. "She's all I thought she was and more, Vince. You're a lucky man."

"I know it." Vincent kissed her neck before helping her lie on the bed.

Joe glowed with pride.

She felt the bed shift, and the men joined her, one on either side. She held her breath for a moment as each of her nipples was captured by a mouth. Vincent sucked gently, soothingly, lovingly at her left bud, while Nathan's mouth was much more demanding, his teeth nipping and his hand firmly squeezing her breast. The contrast was phenomenal.

She felt a hand snake down her oil-slick body. She lifted her hips, anxious to offer all she had to these men. Sure enough, Vincent's fingers rubbed against her clit, first in a slow circle of pleasure, then with increasing urgency. Her hips twitched, and her heart pumped as a wave of pleasure crashed over her. Normally, once she came, Vincent would ease up, but this time, he continued stimulating her button. She bucked against his hand while Nathan continued to suckle one nipple. His hand reached over and twisted the other.

She felt her world spiral out of control as the sensations built into a frenzy of joyous confusion. Joe exploded. Wild colours danced before her eyes. Somewhere, she heard someone screaming, scarcely recognising her own voice. Her whole body burned with joy and passion. She was beautiful. She knew she was beautiful. She was powerful and graceful and lovely and perfect. She gave herself over to the power of the moment and became a goddess.

"Jesus," Vincent said.

Joe heard him, but he seemed so very far away. Her pleasure lifted her soul, and she looked down on herself lying in bed with two gorgeous, generous, dominant men. She hovered, then slowly, slowly, she eased back into herself. Her eyelids fluttered open. Somewhere in the midst of her passion, the blindfold had slipped off. She gazed into the eyes of her man, her Lord and Master. Vincent smiled down at her. He lowered his head and gently kissed her lips.

"You squirted," he whispered.

"What?"

"You ejaculated, little one," he explained, kissing her face.

"Oh, my God," she said, raising her hands to cover face.

Vincent reached for them and forced them down.

"I've never seen anything so beautiful," he assured her.

"Really?"

"If he's lying, I'm not," Nathan concurred. "I'm not bragging, but I've been with my share of women. I've never seen anything as awesome as that."

Joe glowed with pride. Suddenly, inspiration hit her.

"Well, then, my kind Masters," she said humbly, trying to keep a giggle from bubbling out, "perhaps as a proper submissive, I should earn my keep."

She saw the shock in Vincent's eyes and watched as he fought to keep his expression stern. Nathan, not bothering to hide his amusement, lay on his back on the bed and laughed uproariously.

Grinning, she scrambled up to kneel between Nathan's legs. She bent her head and began a slow, sensuous series of licks up his thigh. At the same time, she raised her hips high and wiggled her ass. Vincent took the hint and gave her bottom a quick, light smack.

"Stay there a moment. I've got a handful of condoms on the dresser," he instructed.

Normally, Joe would have answered, but her mouth was full of Nathan's balls. Knowing it was rude to speak with her mouth full, Joe simply wiggled again and continued with her business. Nathan began playing with her hair. She heard Vincent rip open a condom as she worked her way up Nathan's shaft.

She made a low, growling sound in her throat, feeling Vincent's cock touch the entrance of her open, wet tunnel.

She wanted more. She wanted everything. She opened her mouth wide, devouring Nathan's thick cock. At the same time, Vincent plunged deep within her, his hands holding her hips. Her eyes flew open, and her muscles contracted tightly around Vince.

"Watch the teeth," Nathan warned, his hands heavy on her shoulders.

She began to tremble slightly, moving her head up and down, worshiping the beautiful rod in her mouth, keeping rhythm to Vince's insistent pounding. Nathan moaned, lifting his hips to match her movements.

Vincent never slowed his thrusting into her body, but his hand came down in a resounding smack, first on one cheek then the other. She jumped a bit, lifting her mouth from Nathan's throbbing manhood. Nathan grabbed her head, forcing her lips back onto his stiff rod. He kept his hand there, grasping her hair, lifting and pushing, forcing her to suck deeply, paying homage to the man he was.

Joe thought she'd lose her mind. The stinging warmth on her ass, Vincent's cock within her and Nathan's in her mouth were almost more than she could bear. Never had she felt such sensations. She knew her body had been made for this, for the total giving and receiving of pleasure. With this realisation, her body shook. Nathan pushed her head down, holding it, and her lips tingled with the prickly hair surrounding his beauty. Her lips were becoming numb and her jaw ached, but she didn't want to let go.

"Fuck!" Nathan whispered.

His breathing became ragged, and Joe pumped her head up and down, savouring his flavour. He tugged hard on her hair, bringing tears to her eyes as he shot his load of sweet, sweet cream down her throat.

Her muscles contracted around Vincent. She heard his rapid breath and felt him expand within her. He gave one mighty thrust, burying himself in her welcoming nest as he joined her in an earth shaking orgasm.

She collapsed between Nathan's legs. Wisely, he had lifted her head, removing his cock from her sharp little teeth.

Vincent placed a hand on her abused bottom. "Nicely done, little one, nicely done," he complimented then stepped away to removed the filled condom.

Joe could do no more than sigh and nuzzle into the comfort of Nathan's legs.

"You certainly do know how to earn your keep, Blondie," Nathan murmured. "You want to crawl up here and rest a bit?"

Too exhausted to reply, Joe simply shook her head and snuggled deeper between his legs, wrapping her arms around his thighs. She felt perfectly content right where she was, encased in the warmth of his body, the scent of his manhood close to her face. She heard the shower again and knew Vincent was cleaning up and thought she probably should as well, but she just didn't have the energy to move.

Nathan gently petted her head, her neck, her shoulders.

"Just relax for a while, baby," he soothed. "I'm not finished yet, and I'm pretty sure Vince will be up in a bit for round two, also."

When his hand brushed over her wrinkled skin, Joe opened her eyes and stiffened. Nathan must have felt this, because he hesitated a moment before continuing.

"You're beautiful, Blondie. Tits the perfect size to fit in a man's mouth, fabulous ass, small waist, legs that don't stop," he said in a quiet voice. "But lots of women have that. What they don't have, though, is your strength."

Joe turned a bit, lifting herself up on her elbows to look at him, her eyes brimming with tears.

"That damned scar that you're so hung up on ain't nothin' to be ashamed of. It's part of you, part of your strength." He lifted his head a bit to look at her as he continued. "And any bastard tells you otherwise is just a fuckin' moron."

"Oh, Nathan," she cried, letting the tears flow. She climbed on top of him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"You makin' my woman cry?" Vincent asked, walking into the room balancing three glasses of water.

"Careful, Vince, or she won't be your woman for long. I'm pretty sure she'll see the light soon enough, dump your sorry ass and hook up with a real man," Nathan teased, sitting up and reaching for the water.

Joe glanced up quickly at Vincent then grinned, seeing his big smile.

"In your dreams," he sparred back.

Nathan lifted the glass, emptying it in one long gulp, before answering.

"Can't argue with that," he agreed.

Joe sat up and reached for a glass of water. Rather than handing it to her, though, Vincent held it to her lips, tipping it so she could drink. Only when her thirst was quenched did he drink himself. Exhausted, Joe curled up and promptly fell asleep.

* * * *

Feeling warmth on her neck, Joe reluctantly opened her eyes. She allowed herself a self satisfied grin as Nathan dropped tiny kisses along her shoulder.

"You ready for round two, Blondie?" he whispered in her ear.

She turned her head to answer, but before she could, Nathan wrapped his arms around her, pulled her on top of his body and covered her mouth with his. He lifted her hips and positioned himself. Joe squealed. He raised his own hips and pushed her down, plunging deep within her still wet body in one hard thrust. She arched her back, placing her hands on his chest.

"Jesus!" she shouted. Suddenly, her eyes widened in fear. "Nathan, did you put on..."

"Yep. Right before I woke you," he answered as he began swirling his hips in a maddening rhythm.

Of course you did, she thought. Nathan looked out for her safety as much as Vincent did. She should have known he'd have put on a condom without having to question him.

Relaxing a bit, Joe began to mimic his rhythmic dance with her own pelvis. Her hands explored his hairy chest. Not that it was too hairy, she noted. Just the right amount of hair and muscle. Nathan, she realised again, was one hundred percent masculine. Bending her head, she began to kiss his neck and chest, her pussy so full she thought she might split open.

She felt the bed shift and turned her head to find herself looking directly into Vincent's eyes.

"Starting without me?" he asked, his eyes darkening with passion.

"No, I—" she began

"Don't talk," he commanded quietly.

Joe nodded. While his words might be harsh, his tone held the promise of pleasure.

Nathan lifted his head a bit and nipped at one nipple.

"Oh!," she squeaked in surprise.

"Stay focused," he warned, "or you'll be sorry."

Grinning, Joe opened her mouth to answer but, noticing the warning look on Nathan's face, decided to use it for other things. She lowered her body, offering Nathan her lips. His tongue probed deeply into her mouth while his cock continued to burrow inside her pussy. She felt Vince's hands on her ass cheeks then something cold rimming her anus.

Her eyes widened, and she started to rise up. Surely they wouldn't want a double penetration!

Both Nathan and Vince placed hands on her back, pushing her on top of Nathan's strong chest. Nathan pushed deep and stayed. Her thighs shook with pleasure tremors.

Vince inserted a finger into her tight little hole. She squirmed, expecting pain but experience only a pleasant fullness. He worked his finger around a bit then added a second, stretching and massaging her muscles until she loosened in acceptance.

"She's ready," she heard Vince say.

He placed the tip of his condom-covered cock at her second opening while Nathan began a slow, steady movement. Joe squirmed with anticipation. Could she do this? Both men were so big, she wasn't sure.

Carefully, Vince eased himself into her anus, allowing her body to accept him. As he pushed deeper and deeper, Joe experienced some pain. She savoured it. She thought her body would break in half before he became fully encased within her. When he was, though, he remained still for a moment. Nathan kept his steady rhythm.

Vince kissed her shoulder and whispered in her ear, "You good to go now?"

Unable to speak, Joe nodded and was rewarded by a deep rumble that could have been laughter coming from Vince's throat.

He moved his hips. In and out. Nathan continued to pump into her, his breathing becoming more and more ragged as he strove to maintain control. Vince countered his friend's movements so Joe felt like a piston engine, first one cock and then the other pumping into her.

The trembling in her thighs magnified, filling her belly. The pain had transformed into something more. Something so beautiful and warm that it consumed her. She knew, she just knew, that she would burst into flame any moment now and die a happy woman. Her muscles clenched, milking the two cocks.

"I'm goin' soon," Nathan warned.

"Me, too," Vince answered.

Joe squeezed her eyes shut and allowed the feelings to wash over her. She heard a male voice cry out and felt her hips held in a crushing grip. Another voice joined the first. The two rods inside of her expanded just before the explosion.

Joe threw her head back as far as she could and squeezed her arms around Nathan's neck. She was unsure if she screamed or not, but bright sparks flashed in her brain as wave after wave of passion crashed over her quivering body. She dropped her head, letting it rest against Nathan's chest, surfing, slowly descending to earth.

Vincent rolled off her back, relieving her of his weight.

After a few moments, Joe felt Nathan slip out of her dripping pussy. She lifted herself off his luscious body, closing her eyes and snuggling between these two wonderful men. Her last thought before drifting off to sleep again was that life couldn't get any more wonderful.

Epilogue

No Place Like Home

½ oz amaretto

½ oz. Irish Cream

Mix together, shake with ice and pour into a shot glass.

"I'm home!" Cain shouted, slamming the door open.

Joe laughed. Cain always announced his arrival with exuberance. She knelt down, giving the boy a big bear hug.

"Your snack is on the table," she said, helping him shrug off his school backpack.

"Yeah! I'm hungry," he yelled, scampering into the kitchen and sitting at the table. He gulped down a mouthful of milk and shoved half the peanut butter sandwich into his mouth.

Joe sat across from him and frowned. "Hey, kiddo, we've talked about your eating too fast. You'll get a tummy ache again."

Cain immediately dropped the sandwich back to his plate and turned a bit pale. "I'm sorry, Joe," he said in a quiet voice.

Her heart contracted. Would he ever overcome his fear of making a mistake? Smiling, she assured him, "That's okay. I just don't want you to get sick."

Cain returned her smile then continued eating his snack at a more sedate pace. Joe leaned her chin on her hand and watched the boy for a bit.

He'd come to live with her in July. Things had been a bit rocky at first, but eventually he had settled into a routine. Now, three months later, he loved his new school and had made several friends in the neighbourhood. Vince had shifted Joe's hours at the bar so she worked early afternoons and Friday nights. Vince's parents had insisted on becoming Cain's

babysitters and jealously guarded their Friday nights and Saturday mornings with the boy. Whenever Joe and Vince wanted a few private hours together, the Milos were always willing to spend time with the little boy. Joe couldn't have asked for better people to watch over Cain.

Occasionally, Cain's nights were still plagued with disturbing dreams, but these were becoming more and more infrequent now that he was feeling secure in his new home.

"I've got some good news for you, Cain," she hinted, watching him carry his dirty dishes to the sink.

"Really? What?" he asked.

"Why don't you sit on my lap, and I'll tell you," she invited.

Cain hesitated. "You know, I'm getting bigger now."

Joe laughed. "That's exactly why I want you on my lap. Pretty soon, you'll be *too* big."

Cain grinned and willingly hopped up to perch on Joe's knees. Instinctively, she wrapped her arms around the little boy.

"What's the news?" he inquired.

"Your papers came today," she said.

Cain's big eyes peered up into her face.

"You know what that means?"

Cain shook his head.

"It means, silly, that now you're legally mine!" She hugged him tight.

Cain wrapped his arms around her neck and held on. Suddenly, though, he pulled away with a serious look in his eyes.

"Can I ask you something, Joe?" he whispered.

"Baby, you can ask me anything, you know that."

Blinking back tears, he looked up at her and said, "Do you think Mommy would be sad if I called you Mommy now?"

Joe felt her own eyes grow hot with tears.

"No, Baby. I don't think your Mommy would be sad at all. I think she'd be happy," Joe answered with a catch in her throat.

Cain smiled, put both of his small hands on her cheeks and gave her a big, sloppy kiss.

"Who's that kissing my woman?" a deep, growling voice demanded.

Joe glanced up to see Vince leaning against the open kitchen door.

Cain giggled. "Hi, Vince."

"Hey, Big Shot. I see Joe told you the good news," he said, ruffling Cain's hair.

"Yep, so now she's not Joe anymore," the little boy informed him.

"Really? So what is she?" Vince asked, his eyebrows shooting up.

"She's Mommy!" Cain proudly announced. "Hey, maybe you can be my daddy?"

"One big change at a time, okay Buddy?" Joe answered. In truth, Vincent had asked her to marry him, but she wanted a bit more time with just Cain before making that leap. Vincent understood, despite the building pressure from his mother.

"Okay," Cain accepted happily. "Mommy, can I go watch cartoons now?"

Joe lifted him off her lap, kissing the top of his head before giving him a gentle push in the direction of the living room.

She watched her son trot happily into the other room before looking up at Vincent, whose eyes also glistened. He said nothing, simply held out his arms. She stepped gratefully into his embrace, dropping her head onto his shoulder.

She had found her home.

About the Author

I live a very busy and stressful life, being the mother of two teenage boys, a wife, teacher and caretaker of elderly relatives. Nonetheless, I find relaxation and escape from life's difficulties in my writing.

I've wanted to be a published writer all my life but have not had the courage, until recently, to actually submit my writings anywhere. I was raised in a VERY conservative, Catholic family in a VERY conservative Mid-Western small town (St. Louis is the closest city!) I've always been a bit of a rebel - wanting to forge my own path, state my own opinions. Erotic romances give me an outlet for both.

I've always enjoyed writing poetry, but I am finding even more fulfillment in writing erotic stories. What else do I love to do? Cook, eat chocolate, drink wine or Jameson, listen to Celtic music and entertain friends.

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