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Rich Man's
REVENGE

Jennie
LUCAS

Katherine
GARBERA

JENNIE LUCAS

**Rich Man's Revenge:
Dealing Her Final Card /
Seducing His Opposition /
A Reputation For Revenge**

«HarperCollins»

LUCAS J.

**Rich Man's Revenge: Dealing Her Final Card / Seducing His
Opposition / A Reputation For Revenge / J. LUCAS —
«HarperCollins»,**

The last card...Bree Dalton hears the icy words of Russian Prince Vladimir Xendzov, the man whose ring she once wore and whose life she once ruined, as she nervously accepts the biggest wager of her life. Her body for a million dollars. Bree knows better than to doubt the steely ruthlessness of this man. All business, all the time, had made Justin Stern a confirmed bachelor. Yet one glance at Selena Gonzalez and he knew that while marriage wasn't in his future, an air certainly was. He and Selena were on opposite sides of a deal that could make or break them but desire was the top priority. Revenge is at Prince Kasimir's fingertips; the champagne's on ice and his new wife, who married him to save her sister, waits in the bedroom – victory has never been sweeter. But Josie's purity tests the one thing Kasimir never knew he had – honour.

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Jennie Lucas

JENNIE LUCAS grew up dreaming about faraway lands. At fifteen, hungry for experience beyond the borders of her small Idaho city, she went to a Connecticut boarding school on scholarship. She took her first solo trip to Europe at sixteen, then put off college and travelled around the U.S., supporting herself with jobs as diverse as gas station cashier and newspaper advertising assistant.

At 22, she met the man who would be her husband. After their marriage, she graduated from Kent State with a degree in English. Seven years after she started writing, she got the magical call from London that turned her into a published author.

Since then life has been hectic, with a new writing career, a sexy husband and two small children, but she's having a wonderful (albeit sleepless) time. She loves immersing herself in dramatic, glamorous, passionate stories. Maybe she can't physically travel to Morocco or Spain right now, but for a few hours a day, while her children are sleeping, she can be there in her books.

Jennie loves to hear from her readers. You can visit her website at www.jennielucas.com, or drop her a note at jennie@jennielucas.com.

CHAPTER ONE

“BREE, wake up!”

A hand roughly shook Bree Dalton awake. Startled, she sat up with a gasp, blinking in the darkness.

Her younger sister was sitting on the edge of the bed. Tears sparkled on Josie’s pale cheeks in the moonlight.

“What’s happened?” Bree dropped her bare feet to the tile floor, ready to run, ready to fight anyone who had made her baby sister cry. “What’s wrong?”

Josie took a deep breath.

“I really messed up this time.” She wiped her eyes. “But before you freak out, I want you to know it’s going to be fine. I know how to fix it.”

Rather than be comforted by this statement, Bree felt deepening fear. Her twenty-two-year-old sister, six years younger than Bree, had a knack for getting into trouble. And she was wearing the short, sexy dress of a Hale Ka’nani cocktail waitress instead of their gray housekeeping smock.

“Were you working at the bar?” Bree demanded.

“Still worried about some man hitting on me?” Josie barked a bitter laugh. “I *wish* that was the problem.”

“What is it, then?”

Josie ran a hand over her eyes. “I’m tired, Bree,” she whispered. “You gave up everything to take care of me. When I was twelve, I needed that, but now I am so tired of being your burden—”

“I’ve never thought of you that way,” Bree said, stung.

Josie looked at her clasped hands. “I thought this was my chance to pay off those debts, so we could go back to the Mainland. I’ve been practicing in secret. I thought I knew how to play. How to win.”

A chill went down Bree’s spine.

“You gambled?” she said numbly.

“It fell into my lap.” Josie exhaled, visibly shivering in the warm Hawaiian night. “I’d finished cleaning the wedding reception in the ballroom when I ran into Mr. Hudson. He offered to pay me overtime if I’d serve drinks at his private poker game at midnight. I knew you’d say no, but I thought, just this once ...”

“I told you not to trust him!”

“I’m sorry,” Josie cried. “When he invited me to join them at the table, I couldn’t say no!”

Bree clawed back her long blond hair. “What happened?”

“I won,” Josie said defiantly. Then she swallowed. “At least I did for a while. Then I started losing. First I lost the chips I’d won, then I lost our grocery money, and then ...”

Cold understanding went through Bree. She finished dully, “Then Mr. Hudson kindly offered to loan you whatever you needed.”

Josie’s mouth fell open. “How did you know?”

Because Bree knew bullies like Greg Hudson and how they tried to gain the upper hand. She’d met his type before, long ago, in the life she’d given up ten years ago—before she’d fallen in love, and her life had fallen apart. Before the man she loved had betrayed her, leaving her to the sheriff and the wolves— orphaned and penniless at eighteen, with a heartbroken twelve-year-old sister.

But oh, yes. Bree knew Greg Hudson’s type. She closed her eyes, feeling sick as she thought of the hotel manager’s hard eyes above his jovial smile, of his cheerful Hawaiian shirt that barely covered his fat belly. The resort manager had slept with many of his female employees, particularly amongst the lower-paid housekeeping staff. In the two months since the Dalton sisters had arrived in Hawaii, Bree had wondered more than once why he’d gone to such trouble to hire them from Seattle.

He claimed the girls had been recommended by their employment agency, but that didn't ring true. Surely there were many people looking for jobs here in Honolulu.

Josie had laughed at her, teasing her for being "gloomy and doomy," but as Bree had scrubbed the bathrooms and floors of the lavish resort, she'd tried to solve the puzzle in her mind, and her bad feeling only grew. Especially when their boss made it clear over the past few weeks that he was interested in Josie. And made it equally clear the one he really wanted was Bree.

But of course Josie, with her innocent, trusting spirit, never noticed evil around her. She didn't fully understand why Bree had given up gambling, and insisted they work only low-wage jobs for the ten years since their father died, keeping them under the radar of unscrupulous, dangerous men. Josie didn't know how wicked the world could be.

Bree did.

"Gambling doesn't pay." She kept her voice calm. "You should know that by now."

"You're wrong. It does!" Josie said angrily. "We had plenty of money ten years ago." She turned and looked wistfully at the window, toward the moonlit Hawaiian night. "And I thought if I could just be more like you and Dad ..."

"You were using *us* as role models? Have you lost your mind?" Bree exploded. "I've spent the last decade trying to give you a different life!"

"Don't you think I know that?" Josie cried. "What you've sacrificed for me?"

Bree took a deep breath. "It wasn't just for you." Her throat ached as she rose to her feet. "How much money did you lose tonight?"

For a moment, her sister didn't answer. Outside, Bree heard the distant plaintive call of seabirds as Josie stared mutinously at the floor, arms folded. When she finally spoke, her voice was barely audible.

"A hundred."

Bree felt relief so fierce she almost cried. She'd been so afraid it would be worse. Reaching out, she gave her sister's shoulder a squeeze. "It'll be all right." She exhaled in relief. "Our budget will be tight, but we'll just eat a little more rice and beans this month." Wiping her eyes, she tried to smile. "Let this be a good lesson ..."

But Josie hadn't moved from the end of the bed. She looked up, her face pale.

"A hundred *thousand*, Bree," she whispered. "I owe Mr. Hudson a hundred thousand dollars."

For a second, Bree couldn't understand the words. Lingering tears of relief burned her eyes like acid as she stared at her sister.

A hundred thousand dollars.

Turning away, Bree started to pace, compulsively twisting a long tendril of blond hair into a tight ringlet around her finger as she struggled to make sense of all her worst fears coming true. She tried to control her shaking hands. Tried desperately to think of a way out.

"But I told you, you don't have to worry!" Josie blurted out. "I have a plan."

Bree stopped abruptly. "What is it?"

"I'm going to sell the land."

Her eyes went wide as she stared at her sister.

"There's no choice now. Even you must see that," Josie argued, blinking fast as she clasped her hands tightly in her lap. "We'll sell it, pay off the debt, and then pay off those men who are after us. You'll finally be free—"

"That land is in trust." Bree's voice was hard. "You don't get possession until you're twenty-five or married. So put it out of your mind."

Josie shook her head desperately. "But I know how I could—"

"You can't," she said coldly. "And even if you could, I wouldn't let you. Dad put that land into an unbreakable trust for a reason."

"Because he thought I was helpless to take care of myself."

“Because from the day you were born, you’ve had a knack for trusting people and believing the best of them.”

“You mean I’m stupid and naive.”

Controlling herself, Bree clenched her hands at her sides.

“It’s a good quality, Josie,” she said quietly. “I wish I had more of it.”

And it was true. Josie had always put concern for others over her own safety and well-being. As a chubby girl of five, she’d once wandered out of their Alaskan cabin into the snow, hoping to find their neighbor’s cat, which had disappeared the day before. Eleven-year-old Bree had searched their rural street with their panicked father and half a dozen neighbors for hours, until they’d finally found her, lost in the forest, dazed and half-frozen.

Josie had nearly died that day, for the sake of a cat that was found later, snug and warm in a nearby barn.

Bree took a deep breath. Her little sister’s heart was as big as the world. It was why she needed someone not nearly so kind or innocent to protect her. “Are they still playing?”

“Yes,” Josie said in a small voice.

“Who’s at the table?”

“Mr. Hudson and a few owners. Texas Big-Hat, Silicon Valley, Belgian Bob,” she said, using the housekeeping staff’s nicknames for the villa owners. Her eyes narrowed. “And one more man I didn’t recognize. Handsome. Arrogant. He kicked me out of the game.” She scowled. “The others would’ve let me stay longer—”

“You would have just lost more,” Bree said coldly. Turning away, she went behind her closet door and yanked off her oversized sleep shirt, pulling on a bra and then a snug black T-shirt. “We’d owe a million dollars now, instead of just a hundred thousand.”

“It might as well be a million, for all our chance of paying,” Josie grumbled. “For all the good it will do them if I don’t sell that land. They can’t get blood out of a stone!”

Bree pulled on her skinny dark jeans over her slim legs. “And what do you think will happen when you don’t pay?”

“Mr. Hudson will make me scrub his floors for free?” she replied weakly.

Coming around the closet door, Bree stared at her in disbelief. “Scrub his *floors*?”

“What else can he do?”

Bree turned away, muttering to herself. Josie didn’t understand the situation she was dealing with. How could she? Bree had made it her mission in life to protect her from knowing.

She’d hoped they would find peace in Hawaii, three thousand miles away from the ice and snow of Alaska. She’d prayed she would find her own peace, and finally stop dreaming of the blue-eyed, dark-haired man she’d once loved. But it hadn’t worked. Every night, she still felt Vladimir’s arms around her, still heard his low, sensual voice. *I love you, Breanna*. She still saw the brightness of his eyes as he held up a sparkling diamond beneath the Christmas tree. *Will you marry me?*

Ugh. Furiously, Bree pushed the memory away. No wonder she still hated Christmas. Let other women go home to their turkeys and children and brightly lit trees. To Bree, yesterday had been just another workday. She never let herself remember that one magical Christmas night when she was eighteen, when she’d wanted to change her life to be worthy of Vladimir’s love. The night she’d promised herself that she would never—for any reason—gamble or cheat or lie again. Even though he’d left her, she’d kept that promise.

Until now. She reached into the back of her closet, pulling out her black boots with the sharp stiletto heels.

“Bree?” Josie said anxiously.

Not answering, Bree sat down heavily on the bed. Putting her feet into her boots, she zipped up the backs. It was the first time she’d worn these stiletto boots since she was a rebellious teenager with a flexible conscience and a greedy heart. It took Bree back to the woman she’d never thought she

would be again. The woman she'd have to be tonight to save her sister. She glanced at the illuminated red letters of the clock. Three in the morning. A perfect time to start.

"Please, you don't have to do this," her sister whimpered. Her voice choked as she whispered helplessly, "I have a plan."

Ignoring the guilt and anguish in her sister's voice, Bree rose to her feet. "Stay here." Squaring her shoulders, she severed the connection between her brain and her pounding heart. Emotion would only be a liability from here on out. "I'll take care of it."

"No! It's my fault, Bree, and I can fix it. Listen. On Christmas Eve, I met a man who told me how ..."

But Bree didn't wait to hear whatever cockamammy sob story someone might have fed her softhearted sister this time. She grabbed her black leather motorcycle jacket and headed for the door.

"Bree, wait!"

She didn't look back. She walked out of the tiny apartment and went down the open-air hallway to the moss-covered, crumbling concrete steps of the aging building where all the Hale Ka'nani Resort's staff lived.

It's just like riding a bike, Bree told herself fiercely as she raced down the steps. Even after ten years away from the game, she could win at poker. She *could*.

Warm trade winds blew against her cold skin. Pulling on her black leather jacket, she went down the illuminated paths of the five-star resort toward the beautiful, brand-new buildings used by wealthy tourists and the even wealthier villa owners, clustered around the edge of a private, white-sand beach.

My heart is cold, she repeated to herself. I feel nothing.

The moon was full over the Pacific, leaving a ghostly trail across the black water. Palm trees swayed in the warmth of the Hawaiian breeze. She heard the distant call of night birds, smelled the exotic scent of fruit and spice mingling with the salt of the sea.

Above her, dark silhouettes of tall, slender palm trees swayed in a violet sky twinkling with stars. Even with the bright full moon, the night seemed black to her, wide and endless as the sea. She followed the illuminated path around the deserted pool between the beach and the main lobby. As she grew closer to the beach, she heard the sound of the surf build to a roar.

The open-air bar was nearly empty beneath its long thatched roof. Hanging lights swayed in the breeze over a few drunk tourists and cuddling honeymooners. Bree nodded at the tired-eyed bartender, then went past the bar into a connecting hall that led to the private rooms reserved for the villa owners and their guests. Where rich men brought their cheap mistresses and played private, illegal games.

Opening the door, Bree stumbled in her stiletto boots.

Clenching her hands at her sides, she took a deep breath and told her heart to be a lump of ice. Cold. Cold. Cold. She had no feelings of any kind. Poker was easy. By the time she was fourteen, she'd been fleecing tourists in Alaskan ports. And she'd learned the best way not to show emotion was not to feel it in the first place.

Never play with your heart, kiddo. Only a sucker plays with his heart. Even if you win, you lose.

Her father had said those words to her a million times growing up, but she'd still had to learn the hard way. Once, she'd played with all her heart. And lost—everything.

Don't think about it. But in spite of her best efforts, the memory brought a chill of fear. She'd been so determined to leave that life behind. What if she'd forgotten how to play? What if she'd lost her gift? What if she couldn't lure the men in, convince them to let her ante up without money, and get the cards she needed—or bluff them into believing she had?

If she failed at this, then ... Bree felt a flash of sweat on her forehead. Running for the Mainland might be their only option. Or, since they had no money or credit cards and it was doubtful they'd even make it to the airport before they were caught, *swimming* for the Mainland.

She exhaled, forcing her body to calm down and her heart to slow. *It's just poker*, she told herself firmly. *Your heart is cold. You feel nothing.*

Bree went all the way down the long, air-conditioned hall. A large man weighing perhaps three hundred pounds sat at a polished oak door.

She forced a crooked smile in his direction. "Hey, Kai."

The enormous security guard nodded with a single jerk of his chin. "What you doing here, Bree? Saw your sister take off. She sick or something?"

"Something like that."

"You working in her place?" Kai frowned, looking over her dark, tight jeans, her black leather jacket and black stiletto boots. "Where's the uniform?"

"This is my outfit." Her voice was cool as she stared him down. "For poker."

"Oh." His round, friendly face looked confused. "Well. Okay. Go in, then."

"Thanks." Forcing the ice in her voice to fully infuse her heart, she pushed open the door.

The private room for the villa residents had a cavernous ceiling and no windows. The walls were soundproofed with thick red fabric that swooped from a center point on the ceiling. The effect made the room glamorous and cozy and claustrophobic all at once. To Bree, it felt like entering the tent of a sheikh's harem. But as she approached the wealthy men who were playing at the single large table, if there was a stab of fear down her spine, she didn't feel it.

She'd succeeded. She'd turned off her heart.

There were no women players. The only females in the room stood in a circle behind the men, smiling with hawkish red lips, wearing low-cut, tight silk gowns. At the table, she saw the dealer, Chris—what was his last name?—whose eyes widened with surprise when he saw her.

The four players at the table were Greg Hudson and three owners she recognized: a Belgian land developer, a long-mustached oil man from Texas and a short, bald tycoon from Silicon Valley. But where was the arrogant stranger Josie had mentioned? Had he already quit the game?

Whatever. It was time to play.

In her black leather jacket and jeans, Bree pushed through the venomous, overdressed women. Without a word, she sat down at one of the two empty seats at the table around the dealer, beside Greg Hudson.

"Deal me in," she said coolly.

The men blinked, staring at her in shock that was almost comical. One of the men snorted a laugh. Another frowned. "Another cocktail waitress?" one scoffed.

"Actually," Bree said with a grin, "I'm with the housekeeping staff, and so was my sister."

The men glanced at each other uncertainly.

"Well, well. Bree Dalton." Greg Hudson licked his lips, looking at her with beady eyes in his florid, sweaty face. "So. Did you bring the hundred thousand dollars your sister owes me?"

"You know we don't have that kind of money."

"Then I'll send my men to take it out of her hide."

Bree's knees shook beneath the table, but she did not feel fear. Her body might feel whatever it liked, but she'd disconnected it from her heart. Crossing her legs, she leaned back in her chair. "I will play for her debt."

"You!" He snorted. "What will you wager? This game has a five-thousand-dollar buy-in. You could scrub the bathrooms of the entire Hale Ka'nani Resort for years and not have that kind of money."

"I offer a trade."

"You have nothing of value."

"I have myself."

Her boss stared at her, then licked his lips. "You mean—"

“Yes. I mean you could have me in bed.” She looked at him steadily, feeling nothing. Her skin felt cold, her heart as frozen as the blue iceberg that sank the *Titanic*. “You wanted me, Mr. Hudson. Here I am.”

There was a low whistle, an intake of breath around the room.

Bree slowly gazed around the table. She had everyone’s complete attention. Without flinching, she let her gaze taunt each man in turn, all of them larger, older and more powerful than she could ever be. “Who will take the gamble?”

“Well now.” Looking her over, the Texas oil baron thoughtfully tilted back his cowboy hat. “This game just got a lot more interesting.”

In the corner of her eye, she saw a dark, hulking shadow come around the table. A man sat down in the empty chair on the other side of the dealer, and Bree instantly turned to him with languid eyes. “Allow me to join your game, and I could be yours....”

Bree’s voice choked off midsentence as she sucked in her breath.

She knew those cold blue eyes. The high cheekbones, sharp as a razor blade. The strong jaw that proclaimed ruthless, almost thuggish strength. So powerful, so darkly handsome, so sensual.

So impossible.

“No,” she whispered. Not after ten years. Not here. “It can’t be.”

Vladimir Xendzov’s eyes narrowed with recognition, and then she felt the rush of his sudden searing hatred like fire.

“Have you met Prince Vladimir?” Greg Hudson purred.

“*Prince?*” Bree choked out. She was unable to look away from Vladimir’s face, the face of the man she’d dreamed about unwillingly for the past ten years.

His cruel, sensual lips curved as he leaned back in his chair.

“Miss Dalton,” he drawled. “I didn’t know you were in Hawaii. And gambling. What a pleasant surprise.”

His low, husky voice, so close to her, so real, caused a shiver across her skin. She stared at him in shock.

Her one lost love. Not a ghost. Not a dream. But here, at the Hale Ka’nani Resort, not six feet away from her.

“So what’s on offer? Your body, is it?” Vladimir’s words were cold, even sardonic. “What a charming prize that would be, though hardly exclusive. Shared by thousands, I should imagine.”

And just like that, the ice around her heart exploded into a million glass splinters. She sucked in her breath.

Vladimir Xendzov had made her love him with all the reckless passion of an innocent, untamed heart. He’d made her a better person—and then he’d destroyed her. Her lips parted. “Vladimir.”

He stiffened. “*Your Highness* will do.”

She didn’t realize she’d spoken his name aloud. Glancing to the right and left, she matched his sardonic tone. “So you’re using your title now.”

His blue eyes burned through her. “It is mine by right.”

She knew it was true. His great-grandfather had been one of the last great princes of Russia, before he’d died fighting the Red Army in Siberia, after sending his wife and baby son to safety in Alaskan exile. As a poverty-stricken child, Vladimir had been mocked with the title at school. When he was twenty-five, he’d told her that he never intended to use the title, that it still felt like a mockery, an honor he hadn’t earned—and was worthless, anyway.

But apparently, now, he’d found a use for it.

“You didn’t always think so,” Bree said.

“I am no longer the boy you once knew,” he said coldly.

She swallowed. Ten years ago, she’d thought Vladimir was the last honest man on earth. She’d loved him enough to give up the wicked skills that made her special. When he’d held her tight on a

cold Alaskan night and begged her to be his bride, it had been the happiest night of her life. Then he'd ruthlessly deserted her the next morning, before she could tell him the truth. When she needed him most, he'd stabbed her in the back. Some *prince*. "What are you doing here?"

His lip curled. Without answering her, he turned away. "The table is full," he said to the other players. "We do not want her."

"Speak for yourself," one of them muttered, looking at Bree.

Looking around, she jolted in her chair. She'd forgotten the other men were there, looking at her like hungry wolves at a raw mutton chop. The beautiful, sexily dressed women standing in a circle behind them were glaring as if they would like to tear her limb from limb. Perhaps she'd taken her act a little too far.

Feel nothing, she ordered her shivering heart. *I have ice for a heart*. She looked away from the large, powerful men and sharp-taloned women. They couldn't hurt her. The only man who'd ever been able to really hurt her was Vladimir. And what more could he do, that he hadn't done already?

One thing, a cold voice whispered. Ten years ago, he'd taken her heart and soul.

But not her virginity.

And he never would, she told herself fiercely. Bree didn't know what Vladimir Xendzov was doing in Honolulu, but she didn't care. He was ancient history. All that mattered now was protecting Josie.

To save her little sister, Bree would play cards with the devil himself.

With an intake of breath, she lifted her chin, ignoring Vladimir as she looked around the table. "It is for this first game only that I offer my body. If I lose, the winner will get me, along with all the money in the pot. But if I win—" *when I win*, she amended silently—"I will only bet money. Until I possess the entire amount of my sister's debt."

As she spoke, her heart started to resume a normal beat. Bluffing, playing card games, was home to her. She'd learned poker when her father had pulled her up to their table in Anchorage and taught her at the tender age of four. By six, shortly after her mother had died two months after giving birth to Josie, Bree was a child prodigy accompanying her father to games—and, when he saw how much money she could make, his partner in crime.

Leaning forward, she looked at each man in turn, ignoring the death stares of the women behind them. "What is your answer?"

"We are here to play poker," another man complained. "Not for hookers."

Bree twirled her long blond hair slowly around one of her slender fingers and looked through her lashes at the Silicon Valley tycoon. "You don't recognize me, do you, Mr. McNamara?"

"Should I?"

She gave him a smile. "I guess not. But you knew my father, Black Jack Dalton." She paused. "Have you enjoyed the painting you paid him to steal from the archives of the Getty Museum in Los Angeles? When did you learn it was a fake?"

The Silicon Valley tycoon stiffened.

"And Mr. Vanderwald—" she turned to the gray-haired, overweight man sitting beside her boss—"twelve years ago you were nearly wiped out, weren't you? Investing in an Alaskan oil well that never existed."

The Belgian land developer scowled. "How the devil did you—"

"You thought my father conned you. But it was my idea. It was me," she whispered, lowering her eyelashes as she ran her hand down the softly worn leather of her black motorcycle jacket. "It was all me."

"You," the fat man breathed, staring at her.

She was doing well. Then, from the corner of her eye, she felt Vladimir's sardonic gaze. It hit her cheek and the side of her neck like a blast of ice. Her heart skidded with the effort it took to

ignore him. He was the one man who'd ever really known her. The mark she'd stupidly let see behind her mask. She felt his hatred. Felt his scorn.

Fine. She felt the same about him. Let him hate her. His hatred bounced off the thickening ice of her scorn for *him*. She'd thought he was so perfect and noble. She'd killed herself trying to be worthy. But when he'd learned the truth about her past, he'd deserted her, without giving her a chance to explain.

So much for his honor. So much for his *love*.

Bree's lips twisted. Turning away, she gave the rest of the men a sensual smile. "Win this first hand, and you'll have me at your mercy. You'll get your revenge. Humiliate me completely. Take my body, and make your last memory of me one of your own pleasure." She gave a soft sigh, allowing her lips to part. "My skills at cards are nothing compared to what I can do to you in bed. I've learned the art of seduction. You have no idea," she whispered, "what I can do to you. A single hour with me will change your life."

Her act was one hundred percent fraud, of course. She, know the art of seduction? What a joke. She'd have no clue what she'd do with a man in bed. Since Vladimir, she'd been very careful never to let any man close to her. At twenty-eight, she was a virgin. But she did know how to bluff.

The men were riveted.

"I'm in," Greg Hudson croaked.

"And me."

"I accept."

"Yes."

As the men at the table agreed, Bree would have been frightened by all the looks of lust and desire and rage, if she hadn't frozen her heart against emotion.

But the last set of ice-blue eyes held no lust. No desire for domination. Just pure, cold understanding. As if Vladimir alone could see through all her tricks to the scared woman beneath.

"As you wish," he said softly. He gave a cold smile. "Let's play."

His low, sensual voice slid through her body. When she looked into Vladimir's eyes, fear pierced her armor. *Pierced her heart*. She wanted to leap up and run from his knowing gaze, to keep running and never stop. It took every ounce of her willpower to remain in the chair.

Clutching her jacket around her for warmth, she wrenched her gaze away, gripping the black leather so no one could see that her hands were shaking. "Then let's begin."

At Greg Hudson's nod, Chris the dealer dealt the cards. Ignoring the spiteful whispers and daggered glances of the trophy girls, Bree stared at her cards, facedown on the table.

She couldn't let herself think what would happen if she lost. Couldn't even imagine what it would be like to let any of these angry, fat, ugly men take their revenge on her virginal body through rough sex.

But even more awful would be having Vladimir win. Giving her virginity to the man who'd once broken her completely? She couldn't survive it. Not from him.

Just win, she ordered herself. All she had to do was take this first hand, and her virginity would no longer be on offer. It would be a long night of poker trying to win a hundred thousand dollars. But this was the most important hand.

Closing her eyes, she silently prayed. Then she picked up the cards. Careful not to let any of the players see them, she looked at them.

It took every ounce of her skill not to gasp.

Three kings. She had three kings, along with a four and a queen. Three kings. She nearly wept with relief. It was as if fate had decided she was gambling for the right reasons and deserved to win.

Unless it was more than fate ...

She looked up through her lashes toward the young dealer. Could he be helping her? Chris was about Josie's age, and he'd come twice to their apartment for dinner. He wasn't exactly a close friend,

but he'd spoken many times with irritation about Greg Hudson's poor management skills. "You would do a better job of running this resort, Bree," he'd grumbled, and she'd agreed with a smile. "But who wouldn't?"

Now, catching her eye, the young dealer gave her a wink and a smile.

Sucking in her breath, Bree looked away before anyone noticed. Her eyes accidentally fell on Vladimir's. His eyebrows lowered, and she gulped, looking back down at her cards, hastily making her expression blank. Had he seen? Could he guess?

The dealer turned to his left. "Your Highness?"

Because of his placement at the table, Vladimir was the first one required to add a bet to the pile of chips already in the middle of the table from the ante. "Raise."

Raise? Bree looked up in surprise. He was looking straight at her as he said, "Five thousand."

Texas Big-Hat cursed and threw his cards on the table. "Fold."

"Call," Silicon Valley said, matching Vladimir's bet.

"Call," Mr. Vanderwald puffed, a bead of sweat dripping down his forehead.

"Call," Greg Hudson said.

All eyes turned to Bree.

"She's already all in," Greg Hudson said dismissively. "There's nothing more she can wager."

He was right, she thought with a pang. She couldn't match Vladimir's raise, and that meant even if she won the hand, she couldn't win anything beyond the twenty-five thousand dollars' worth of chips currently in the center. What a waste of three kings ...

Bree suddenly smiled. "I call."

"Call?" Greg Hudson hooted. "You have an extra five thousand dollars hidden in the back pocket of those jeans?"

She stretched back her shoulders and felt the eyes of the men linger on the shape of her breasts beneath her black T-shirt. "I can match the bet in other ways. Instead of just an hour in bed, I'll offer an entire night." She tilted back her head, allowing her long blond hair to tumble provocatively down her shoulders. "Many chances. Multiple positions. As fast or slow or hard as you like it, all night long, and each time better than the last. Against the wall. Bent over the bed. In my mouth."

She felt like a total fool. She hoped she sounded like a woman who knew what she was talking about, not a scared virgin whose idea of lovemaking was vague at best, based only on movies and novels. But as she looked at each man at the table they seemed captivated. She exhaled. Her mask was holding. She was convincing them. Even Chris the dealer looked entranced.

Vladimir alone seemed completely unaffected. Bored, even. His lips twisted with scorn. And his eyes—

His blue eyes saw straight through her. A hot blush burned her cheeks as she said to him, "Do you agree my bet is commensurate with your five thousand dollar raise?"

"No," Vladimir said coldly. "That is not a call."

Her heart sank. "You ..."

He gave her a calm smile. "That is an additional raise."

"A ... a raise?" she echoed uncertainly.

"Obviously. Let us say ... your added services are equivalent to an additional five thousand dollars? Yes. A full night with you would surely be worth that." He lifted a dark eyebrow. "Would you not agree?"

"Five thousand more?" Greg Hudson's voice hit a false note. Catching himself, he shifted uncomfortably in his chair and snickered, "Fine with me. I'm half *raised* already."

"Good," Vladimir said softly, never looking away from Bree. "So we are in agreement."

Bree's brow furrowed as she tried to read his expression. What on earth was he doing?

Trying to help her? Or giving her more rope to hang herself with?

Repressing her inner tumult, she stared him down. *In for a penny ...* She lifted her chin. “If it’s worth five more, then why not ten more?”

The corners of Vladimir’s mouth lifted. “Yes, indeed. Why not?” He looked around the table. “Miss Dalton has raised the wager by ten thousand dollars.”

To her shock, one by one the men agreed to her supposed “raise,” except for the Belgian, who folded with an unintelligible curse.

And just like that—oh, merciful heavens—there was suddenly a pile of chips at the center of the table worth *seventy-five thousand dollars*.

She looked at each man as they discarded cards and got new ones from the dealer.

Don’t play the hand, her father had always said. *Play the man*.

She forced herself to look across the table at Vladimir. His face was inscrutable as he discarded a card and got a new one. When she’d played him ten years ago, he’d had a tight style of play. He did not bluff, he did not overbet—the exact opposite of Bree’s strategy.

He lifted his eyes to hers, and against her will, her heart turned over in her chest. His handsome face revealed nothing. The poverty of his homesteading Alaskan childhood, so different from hers, had pushed him to create a billion-dollar business across the world, primarily in metals and diamonds. He was so ruthless he had cut his own younger brother out of their partnership right before a multimillion-dollar deal. It was said Vladimir Xendzov had molten gold in his veins and a flinty diamond instead of a heart. That he wasn’t flesh and blood.

But if Bree closed her eyes, she could still remember their last night together, when they’d almost made love on a bearskin rug beneath the Christmas tree. She could remember the heat and searing pleasure of his lips against her skin in the deep hush of that cold winter’s night.

I love you, Breanna. As I’ve never loved anyone.

No one else had ever called Bree by her full name. Not like that. Now, as they looked at each other across the poker table, they were two enemies with battle lines drawn. Everything she’d ever thought him to be was a dream. All that was left was a savagely handsome man with hard blue eyes and an emotionless face.

She turned away. Greg Hudson and the Silicon Valley tycoon were far easier to read. She watched her boss get three new cards, saw the sweat on his face and the way he licked his thick, rubbery lips as he stared down at his hand. Hudson had nothing. A pair of twos, maybe.

She looked at Silicon Valley. His lips were tight, his eyes irritated as he stared down moodily at his cards. He was probably already thinking about the twenty thousand dollars he’d wagered in the pot. She hid a smile.

“Miss Dalton?” Chris the dealer said. Stone-faced, she handed in the four of spades. Waited. And got back ...

A queen.

She forced herself not to react, not even to breathe. Three kings and two queens. *A full house.*

It was an almost unbeatable hand. Careful not to meet Vladimir’s eyes, she placed her cards facedown on the table. How she wished she could raise again! If only she had more to offer, she could have finished off her sister’s debt right now—with a single hand!

Don’t be greedy, she ordered herself. Seventy-five thousand dollars was plenty. Once she had it safely in her possession, the offer of her body—and unbeknownst to the men, her virginity—would be off the table.

But still. A full house. Her heart filled with regret.

“Raise,” Vladimir said.

She looked up with a frown. Why would he raise now?

His eyes met hers. “Fifteen thousand.”

“Fold.” With a growl, Silicon Valley tossed his cards on the table. “Damn you.”

Greg Hudson nervously wiped his forehead. For several seconds, he stared at his cards. Then he said in a small voice, "Call."

They all looked at her. Bree hesitated. She wanted to match Vladimir's raise. *Yearned* to. She had an amazing hand, and the amount now in the pot was even more than her sister's debt. But without anything more to offer, she was already all in. Even if she won, she wouldn't get the additional amount.

If only she had something more to offer!

"Well?" Vladimir's eyes met hers. "Will you call? Perhaps," he said in a sardonic voice, "you wish to raise your offer to an entire *weekend* of your charms?"

Bree stared at him in shock. A weekend?

She didn't know why he was helping her—or if he thought he could hurt her. But with this hand, it didn't matter. She was going to win.

"Great idea," she said coolly. "I'll match your raise with a full weekend of my—how did you put it? My charms?"

Vladimir's lips turned up slightly at the edges, though his eyes revealed nothing.

Heart pounding, she waited for Greg Hudson to object. But he didn't even look up. He just kept staring at his own cards, chewing on his lower lip.

It was time to reveal cards. Vladimir, based on his position at the table, went first. Slowly, he turned over his cards. He had two pairs—sevens and nines.

Relief flooded through Bree, making her body almost limp. She hadn't realized until that moment how scared she'd been that even with her completely unbeatable hand, Vladimir might find a way to beat her.

Greg Hudson's cards, on the other hand, were a foregone conclusion. He muttered a curse as he revealed a pair of threes.

Blinking back tears, Bree turned over her cards to reveal her full house, the three kings and two queens. There was a smattering of applause, exclamations and cursing across the room. She nearly wept as she reached for the pile of chips at the center of the table.

She'd saved Josie.

She'd won.

Bree's legs trembled beneath her as she rose unsteadily to her feet, swaying in her high-heeled stiletto boots. She pushed the bulk of the chips toward Greg Hudson, keeping only a handful for herself. "This pays my sister's debt completely, yes? We are free of you now?"

"Free?" Greg Hudson glared at her, then his piggy eyes narrowed. "Yes, you're free. In fact, I want you and your sister off this property tonight."

"You're firing us?" Her jaw dropped. "For what cause?"

"I don't need one," he said coldly.

She stiffened. She hadn't seen that coming. She should have. A small-minded man like her boss would never stand being beaten in a card game by a female employee. He'd already resented her for weeks, for the respect she'd quickly gained from the staff, and all the notes she'd left in the suggestion box, listing possible ways to improve his management of the resort.

"Fine." She grabbed her handful of chips and glared at him. "Then I'll tell you what I should have written up in the suggestion box weeks ago. This resort is a mess. You're being overcharged by your vendors, half your employees are stealing from you and the other half are ready to quit. You couldn't manage your way out of a paper bag!"

Mr. Hudson's face went apoplectic. "You—"

She barely heard him as he cursed at her. These extra chips, worth thousands of dollars, would give both Dalton girls a new start—buy them a plane trip back to the Mainland, first and last months' rent on a new apartment, and a little something extra to save for emergencies. And she would go someplace where she'd be sure she never, ever saw Vladimir Xendzov again. "I'll just cash in these chips, collect our last paychecks, and we'll be on our way."

“Wait, Miss Dalton,” Vladimir said from behind her in a low, husky voice.

Her body obeyed, without asking her brain. Slowly, she turned. She couldn’t help herself.

He was sitting calmly at the table, looking up at her with heavily lidded eyes. “I wish to play one more game with you.”

Nervousness rose in her belly, but she tossed her head. “So desperate to win your money back? Are times so tough for billionaires these days?”

He smiled, and it did not meet his eyes. “A game for just the two of us. Winner take all.”

“Why would I do that?”

Vladimir indicated his own entire pile of chips. “For this.”

The blood rushed from her head, making her dizzy. “*All* of that?” she gasped.

He gave her a single nod.

Greg Hudson made a noise like a squeak. Sweat was showing through his tropical cotton shirt as he, along with everyone in the room, stared at the pile of chips. “But Prince Vladimir—Your Highness—that’s a million dollars,” he stammered.

“So it is,” he replied mildly, as if the amount were nothing at all—and to Vladimir, it probably wasn’t.

A single bead of sweat broke out between Bree’s breasts. “And what would you want from me?”

His blue eyes seared right through her. “If I win,” he said quietly, “you would be mine. For as long as I want you.”

As long as he wanted her? “That would make me your ... your slave.”

Vladimir gave her a cold smile. “It is a wager I offer. You. For a million dollars.”

“But that’s—”

“Make your choice. Play me or go.”

She swallowed, hearing a roar of blood in her ears.

“You can’t just buy her!” her ex-boss brayed.

“That’s up to Miss Dalton,” Vladimir said. He turned his laserlike gaze on Bree. “So?”

Though there were ten other people in the room, it was so quiet she could have heard a pin drop. All eyes were on her.

A million dollars. The choice she made in this moment would determine the rest of her life—and Josie’s. They could pay off their father’s old debts to unsavory men, the ones that had kept them in virtual hiding for the past ten years. Josie would be free to go to college—any college she wanted. And Bree could start her own little B and B by the sea.

They’d no longer have to hide or be afraid.

They’d be free.

“What is the game?” she said weakly. “Poker?”

“Let’s keep it easy. Leave it to fate. One card.”

Her eyes widened. “One ...”

His gorgeous face and chilly blue eyes revealed nothing as his sensual lips curved. “Are you feeling lucky, Miss Dalton?”

Was she feeling lucky?

Taking a million dollars from Vladimir would be more than sweet revenge. It would be justice for how he’d coldly abandoned her when she’d needed him most. He’d destroyed ten years of her life. She could take this one thing from him. A new life for her and Josie.

But risk being Vladimir’s slave—forever? The thought made her body turn to ice. It was too much to risk on a random card from the deck.

Unless ... it wasn’t so random.

She looked sideways beneath her lashes at Chris, the dealer. He lowered his head, his expression serious. Was that a nod? Did she have a sympathetic ally? She closed her eyes.

How much was she willing to risk on a single card?

Are you feeling lucky, Miss Dalton?

Bree exhaled. She'd just won a hundred thousand dollars in a single game. She slowly opened her eyes. So, yes, she felt lucky. She sat back down at the table.

"I accept your terms," she stated emphatically.

Vladimir's smile widened. "So to be clear. If my card is higher, you'll belong to me, obeying my every whim, for as long as I desire."

"Yes," she said, glancing again at Chris. "And if mine is higher, you will give me every chip on that table."

"Agreed." Vladimir lifted a dark eyebrow. "Ace card high?"

"Yes."

They stared at each other, and Bree again forgot there was anyone else in the room. Until someone coughed behind her, and she jumped, realizing she'd been holding her breath.

Vladimir turned to the dealer. "Shuffle the deck."

Bree put the chips she'd won in the last game into a little pile and pushed them aside. "I will select my own card."

Her opponent looked amused. "I would expect no less."

They both turned to Chris, who visibly gulped. Shuffling carefully, with all eyes upon him, he fanned out the facedown cards. He turned them toward Bree, who made her selection, then toward Vladimir, who did the same.

Holding her breath, Bree slowly turned her card over.

The king of hearts.

She'd drawn the king of hearts! She'd won!

She gasped aloud, no longer able to control her emotions. Flipping her card onto the table to reveal the suit, she covered her face with her palms and sobbed with joy. After ten years, fate had brought the untouchable Vladimir Xendzov into her hands, to give her justice at last. Parting her hands, she lifted her gaze, waiting for the sweetness of the moment when he turned over his own losing card, and his face fell as he realized he'd lost and she'd won.

Vladimir looked down at his card. For an instant, his hard expression didn't change.

Then he looked up at her and smiled. A real smile that reached his eyes.

It was an ice pick through her heart.

"Sorry, Bree," he said casually, and tossed his card onto the table.

She stared down at the ace of diamonds.

Her mind went blank. Then a tremble went through her, starting at her toes and moving up her body as she looked at Vladimir, her eyes wide and uncomprehending. She dimly heard Greg Hudson's annoyed curse and the other men's cheers, heard the women's snide laughter—except for the woman directly behind Vladimir, who seemed to be crying.

"You—you've ..." Bree couldn't speak the words.

"I've won." Vladimir looked at her, his blue eyes electric with dislike. He rose from his chair, all six feet four inches of him, and said coldly, "You have ten minutes to pack. I will collect my winnings in the lobby." As she gaped at him, he walked around the table to stand over her, so close she could feel the warmth of his body. He leaned nearer, his face inches from hers.

"I've waited a long time for this," he said softly. "But now, at last, Bree Dalton—" his lips slid into a hard, sensual smile "—you are mine."

CHAPTER TWO

BREE'S heart stopped in her chest.

As Vladimir turned away, she struggled to wake up from this bad dream. She looked down at her overturned card on the table. The king of hearts looked back at her. Bree should have won. She was supposed to win. Her brain whirled in confusion.

"Wake up," she whispered to herself. But it wasn't a dream.

She'd just sold herself. Forever. To the only man she hated.

Blinking, she looked up tearfully at the young dealer, who she'd thought was her ally. Chris just shook his head. "Wow," he said in awe. "That was a really stupid bet."

Bree gripped the edge of the table with trembling hands. Staggering to her feet, she turned on Vladimir savagely. "You cheated!"

From the doorway, he whirled back to face her. "*Cheated?*"

He went straight toward her, and the crowds parted for him, falling back from his powerful presence and his expression of fury. He looked as cold as a marble statue, like an ancient tsar of perfect masculine beauty, of despotic strength and ruthless cruelty. He reached for her, and she backed away, terrified of the look in his eyes.

Vladimir dropped his hands. His posture relaxed and his voice became a sardonic drawl. "You are the one who cheats, my dear. And you'd best hurry." He glanced at his platinum watch. "You now only have—nine minutes to pack before I collect my prize."

She gasped aloud. His *prize*?

Her body—her soul!

Turning without another word, Vladimir stalked out the door with a warrior's easy, deadly grace. Everyone in the room, Bree included, remained silent until the door closed behind him. Then the crowd around her burst into noise, and Bree's knees went weak. She leaned her trembling hands against the table. Her ex-boss was yelling something in her ear: "Nine minutes is too long. I want you out of the Hale Ka'nani in five!"

Greg Hudson looked as if he were dying to slap her across the face. But she knew he couldn't touch her. Not now. Not ever.

She was Vladimir Xendzov's property now.

How could she have been so stupid? How?

Bree had never hated herself so much as she did in that moment. She rubbed her eyes, hard. She'd thought she could save her hapless baby sister from the perils of gambling. Instead, she'd proved herself more stupidly naive than Josie had ever been.

The warm, close air in the red-curtained, windowless room suddenly choked her. Pushing past the annoyed blonde who'd stood behind Vladimir's chair, Bree ran for the exit, past a startled Kai who was guarding the door. She rushed down the hall, past the deserted outdoor bar, into the dark night.

She ran up the hill, trying to focus on the feel of the path beneath her feet, on the hard rhythm of her breathing. But she was counting down her freedom in minutes. Eight. Seven and a half. Seven.

Her right foot stumbled and she slowed to a walk, her breath a rasp in her throat. The moon glowed above her as she reached the apartment building she shared with her sister.

Bree shivered as a warm breeze blew against her clammy skin. Rushing up the open-air stairs of the aged, moss-covered structure, she shook with fear. He would take everything from her. Everything.

She'd been stupid. So stupid. He'd set his trap and she'd walked right into it. And now Josie would be left alone, with no one to watch out for her.

Bree started to reach for the doorknob, then stopped. Her body shook as she remembered the poker chips she'd been so proud to win—all of which she'd left behind. With a choked sob, she covered her face with her hands. How would she ever explain this disaster to Josie?

The door abruptly opened.

"There you are," Josie said. "I saw you come up the path. Did you manage to ...?" But her sister's hopeful voice choked off when she saw Bree's face. "Oh," she whispered. "You ... you lost?"

Josie spoke the words as if they were impossible. As if she'd never once thought such a thing could happen. Bree had never lost big like this before—ever. Even tonight, she would have won, if she hadn't allowed Vladimir to tempt her into one last game. Her hands clenched at her sides. She didn't know who she hated more at this moment—him or herself.

Him. Definitely him.

"What happened?" Josie breathed.

"The stranger was Vladimir," Bree said through dry lips. "The man who kicked you out of the game was Vladimir Xendzov."

Josie stared at her blankly. But of course—she'd been only twelve when their father had died, and Bree had set her sights on the twenty-five-year-old businessman with a small mining company, who'd returned to Alaska to try to buy back his family's land. She'd hoped to con him out of enough cash to pay off the dangerous men who'd tracked them down and were demanding repayment of the money Black Jack and Bree had once stolen.

She'd fallen for Vladimir instead. And Christmas night, when he'd proposed to her, she'd decided to tell him everything. But his brother told him first—and by then, it was in the newspapers. Without a word, he'd abruptly left Alaska, leaving eighteen-year-old Bree and her sister threatened by dangerous men—as well as the sheriff, who'd wanted to toss Bree into jail and Josie into foster care. So they'd thrown everything into their beat-up old car in the middle of the night, and headed south. For the past ten years, they'd never stopped running.

"You lost? At poker?" Josie repeated, dazed. Her eyes suddenly welled up with tears. "This is all my fault."

"It's not your fault," Bree said tightly.

"Of course it is!"

Josie was clearly miserable. Looking at her little sister's tearful face, Bree came to a sudden decision. She grabbed her duffel bag.

"Pack," she said tersely.

Josie didn't move. Her expression was bewildered. "Where are we going?"

Bree stuffed her passport into her bag, and any clean clothes she could reach. "Airport. You have two minutes."

"Oh, my God," Josie breathed, staring at her. "You want to run. What on earth did you lose?"

"Move!" Bree barked.

Jumping, her sister turned and grabbed her knapsack. A scant hundred seconds later, Bree was pulling on her hand and yanking her toward the door.

"Hurry." She flung open the door. "We'll get our last paychecks and—"

Vladimir stood across the open-air hallway. His broad-shouldered, powerful body leaned casually against the wall in the shadows.

"Going somewhere?" he murmured silkily.

Bree stopped short, staring up in shock. Behind her, Josie ran into her back with a surprised yelp.

He lifted a dark eyebrow and gave Bree a cold smile. "I had a feeling you would attempt to cheat me. But I admit I'm disappointed. Some part of me had hoped you might have changed over the last ten years."

Other hulking shadows appeared on the stairs. He hadn't come alone.

Desperately, Bree tossed her head and glared at him defiantly. “How do you know I wasn’t just hurrying to be on time to meet you in the lobby?”

Vladimir’s smile became caustic. “Hurrying to meet me? No. Ten years ago you could barely be on time for anything. You’d have been late to my funeral.”

“Oh, I’d be early for your funeral, believe me! Holding flowers and red balloons!”

His blue eyes gleamed as he came toward her in the shadows. She felt Josie quivering behind her, so as he reached for her, Bree forced herself not to flinch or back away.

“People don’t change,” he said softly. He pulled the duffel bag from her shoulder. Unzipping it, he turned away from her, and she exhaled. Then, as he went through the bag, she glared at him.

“What do you think I have in there—a rifle or something? Didn’t anyone ever tell you it’s rude to go through other people’s stuff?”

“A woman like you doesn’t need a rifle. You have all the feminine weapons you need. Beauty. Seduction. Deceit.” Vladimir gazed at her with eyes dark as a midnight sea. His handsome, chiseled face seemed made of granite. “A pity your charms don’t work on me.”

As she looked at him, her throat tightened. She whispered, “If you despise me so much, just let me go. Easier for you. Easier for everyone.”

His lips curved. “Is that the final item on your checklist?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’ve tried running, insulting me, accusing me of cheating, and now you’re *reasoning* with me.” Zipping up the bag, he pushed it back into her arms and looked at her coldly. “What’s next—begging for mercy?”

She held the bag over her heart like a shield. “Would it work?” she breathed. “If I begged you—on my knees—would you let me go?”

Reaching out, Vladimir cupped her cheek. He looked down at her almost tenderly. “No.”

She jerked her chin away. “I hate you!”

Vladimir gave a low, bitter laugh. “So you did have a checklist. It’s fascinating, really, how little you’ve changed.”

If only that were true, Bree thought. She didn’t have a plan. She was going on pure instinct. Ten years of living a scrupulously honest life, of scraping to get by on minimum-wage jobs, and taking care of her sister, had left Bree’s old skills of sleight of hand and deception laughably out-of-date. She was rusty. She was clumsy and awkward.

And Vladimir made it worse. He brought out her weakness. She couldn’t hide her feelings, even though she knew it would be to her advantage to cloak her hatred. But he’d long ago learned the secret ways past the guarded walls of her heart.

“You can’t be serious about making me your slave forever!” she snapped.

“What?” Josie gasped, clinging to her arm.

Vladimir’s eyes were hard in the moonlight. “You made the bet. Now you will honor it.”

“You tricked me!”

He gave her a lazy smile. “You thought that dealer was going to stick his neck out for you, didn’t you? But men don’t sacrifice themselves for women anymore. Not even for pretty ones.” He moved closer to her, leaning his head down to her ear. “I know all your tells, Bree,” he whispered. “And soon ... I will know every last secret of your body.”

Bree felt the warmth of his breath on her neck, felt the brush of his lips against the tender flesh of her earlobe. Prickles raced through her, making her hair stand on end as he towered over her. She felt tiny and feminine compared to his powerful masculine strength, and against her will, she licked her lips as a shiver went down her body.

Vladimir straightened, and his eyes glittered like an arctic sea. “This time, you will fulfill your promises.”

He made a small movement with his hand, and the three shadows on the stairs came forward, toward the bare light outside their apartment. Vladimir strode down the steps without looking back, leaving his three bodyguards to corral the two Dalton sisters and escort them down the concrete staircase.

Two luxury vehicles waited in the dimly lit parking lot. The first was a black SUV with tinted windows. The second ... Bree's feet slowed.

"Bree!"

Hearing her sister's panicked voice behind her, she turned around and saw the bodyguards pushing Josie into the backseat of the SUV.

Bree clenched her hands as she went forward. "Let her go!"

Vladimir grabbed her arm. "You're coming with me."

"I won't be separated from her!"

He looked at her, his face hard and oh, so handsome in the moonlight. "My Lamborghini only has two seats." When she didn't move, he said with exaggerated patience, "They will be right behind us."

Glancing at the SUV parked behind the Lamborghini, Bree saw her sister settled in the backseat as the bodyguards climbed in beside her. Bree ground her teeth. "Why should I trust you?"

"You have no choice."

He reached for her hand, but she ripped it away. "Don't touch me!"

Vladimir narrowed his eyes. "I was merely trying to be courteous. Clearly a waste." He thrust his thumb toward the door of the bright red Lamborghini. "Get in."

Opening the door, Bree climbed inside the car and took a deep breath of the soft leather seats' scent. Fast cars had once been her father's favorite indulgence, back when they'd been conning rich criminals across the West, and Black Jack had been spending money even faster than they made it. By the time her father died of lung cancer, only debts were left. But the smell of the car reminded her of the time when her father had been her hero and their mattresses had been stuffed with money—literally. Unwillingly, Bree ran her hand over the smooth leather.

"Nice car," she said grudgingly.

With a sudden low laugh, Vladimir started the engine. "It gets me where I need to go."

At the sound of that laugh, she sucked in her breath.

His laugh ...

She'd first heard it at a party in Anchorage, when Vladimir Xendzov was just a mark, half owner of a fledgling mining company, who had come to Alaska looking to buy the land her father had left in an ironclad trust for Josie, then just twelve years old. Bree had been hoping she could distract Vladimir from the legal facts long enough to disappear with his money. Instead, when their eyes met across the room, she'd been electrified. He'd grabbed an extra flute of champagne and come toward her.

"I know who you are," he'd said.

She'd hid the nervous flutter in her belly. "You do?"

He gave her a wicked smile. "The woman who's coming home with me tonight."

For an instant, she'd caught her breath. Then she'd laughed in his face. "Does that line usually work?"

He'd looked surprised, then he'd joined her laughter with his own low baritone. "Yes," he'd said almost sheepishly. "In fact, it always does." He'd held out his hand with a grin. "Let's try this again. I'm Vladimir."

Now, as his eyes met hers, his expression was like stone. He yanked hard on the wheel of the Lamborghini, pulling the car away from the curb with a squeal of tires. Bree glanced behind them, and saw her sister's SUV was indeed following them. She exhaled.

She had to think of a way to get out of this prison sentence. She looked at the passing lights of Honolulu. The city sparkled, even in the dead of night.

Deals can always be made. Her father's words came back to her. Just figure out what a man wants most. And find a way to give it to him—or make him think you will.

But what could a man like Vladimir possibly want, that he didn't already have?

He was frequently in the business news—and nearly as often in the tabloids. He was the sole owner of Xendzov Mining OAO, with operations on six continents. His company was one of the leading producers of gold, platinum and diamonds around the world. He was famous for his workaholic ways, for his lavish lifestyle, and most of all for the ruthless way he crushed his competition—most spectacularly his own brother, who'd once been part-owner of the company before Vladimir had forced him out, the same day he'd abandoned Bree in Alaska. For ten years, the two brothers' brutal, internecine battles had caused them both to lose millions of dollars, tarnishing both their reputations.

Ala Moana Boulevard was deserted as they drove away from Waikiki, heading toward downtown. Along the wide dark beach across the street, palm trees stretched up into the violet sky. They passed Ala Moana Center, which was filled with shops such as Prada, Fendi and Louis Vuitton—brands that Bree had once worn as a teenage poker player, but which as a hotel housekeeper she couldn't remotely afford. Vladimir could probably buy out the entire mall without flinching, she thought. Just as he'd bought her.

Bree rolled down her window to breathe the warm night air. "So tell me," she said casually. "What brings you to Honolulu?"

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. "Don't."

"What?"

"Play whatever angle you're hoping to use against me."

"I wasn't ..."

"I can hear the purr in your voice." His voice was sardonic. "It's the same one you used at the poker table, whipping the male players into a frenzy by offering your body as the prize."

Anger rushed through her, but she took a deep breath. He was right—that wasn't exactly her proudest moment. She looked down at her hands, clenched in her lap. "I was desperate. I had nothing else to offer."

"You weren't desperate when you played that last card against me. Your sister's debt was already paid. You could have walked away."

Tears burned the backs of her eyes. "You don't understand. We are in debt—"

"Fascinating." His voice dripped sarcasm.

Didn't he have even the slightest bit of humanity, even a sliver of a flesh-and-blood heart? Her throat ached as she looked away. "I can't believe I ever loved you."

"*Loved?*" Changing gears as they sped down the boulevard, he gave a hard laugh. "It's tacky to bring that up. Even for you."

Ahead of them, she saw the towering cruise ships parked like floating hotels at the pier. She blinked fast, her heart aching. She wished both she and Josie were on one of those ships, headed to Japan—or anywhere away from Vladimir Xendzov. She swallowed against the razor blade in her throat. "You can't be serious about taking me to bed."

"The deal was made."

"What kind of man accepts a woman's body as a prize in a card game?"

"What kind of woman offers herself?"

She gritted her teeth and blinked fast, staring at the Aloha Tower and the cruise ships. Without warning, Vladimir suddenly veered the Lamborghini to the right.

Glancing behind them, Bree saw the SUV with her sister continuing straight down the Nimitz Highway, a different direction from the Lamborghini. She turned to him with a gasp.

“Where are you taking my sister?”

Vladimir pressed down more firmly on the gas, zooming at illegal speeds through the eerily empty streets of downtown Honolulu in the hours before dawn. “You should be more concerned about where I am taking you.”

“You can’t separate me from Josie!”

“And yet I have,” he drawled.

“Take me back!”

“Your sister has nothing to do with this,” he said coldly. “*She* did not wager her body.”

Bree cursed at him with the eloquence of Black Jack Dalton himself, but Vladimir only glanced at her with narrowed eyes. “You have no power over me, Bree. Not anymore.”

“No!” Desperate, she looked around for a handy police car—anything! But the road was empty, desolate in the darkest part of night before dawn. “I won’t let you do this!”

“You’ll soon learn to obey me.”

She gasped in desperate fury. Then she did the only thing she could think of to make him stop the car. Reaching between the seats, she grabbed the hand brake and yanked upwards with all her might.

Bree’s neck jerked back and tires squealed as the fast-moving car spun out of control.

As if in slow motion, she looked at Vladimir. She heard his low gasp, saw him fight the steering wheel, gripping until his knuckles were white. As the car spun in a hard circle, the colored lights of the city swirled around them, then shook in chaos when they bumped up over a curb. Bree screamed, throwing her hands in front of her face as the car plummeted toward a skyscraper of glass and steel.

The red Lamborghini abruptly pulled to a stop.

With a gulp, Bree slowly opened her eyes. When she saw how close they had come to hitting the office building, she sucked in her breath. Dazed, she reached her hand through the car’s open window toward the plate glass window, just inches away, literally close enough for her to touch. If Vladimir weren’t such a capable driver ... If the car had gone a little more to the right ...

They’d have crashed through the lobby of the skyscraper in an explosion of glass.

Her reckless desperation to save her sister had very nearly killed them both. Bree was afraid to look at him. She coughed, eyes watering from the cloud of dust that rose from the car’s tires. She slowly turned.

Vladimir’s silhouette was framed by a Gothic cathedral of stone and stained glass on the other side of the street. A fitting background for the dark avenging angel now glaring at her in deathly fury.

“The airport.” His breathing was still heavy, his blue eyes shooting daggers of rage. “My men are taking your sister to the *airport*, damn you. Do you think I would hurt her?”

Heart in her throat, Bree looked back at him. “How would I know?”

He stared at her for a long moment. “You,” he said coldly, “are the only one who’s put her at risk. You, Bree.”

As he restarted the car and drove down the curb, back onto the deserted road, a chill went down her spine.

Was he right?

She put her hand against her hot forehead. She’d spent ten years protecting her sister with all her heart, but from the moment she’d seen Vladimir, her every instinct was wrong. Every choice she made seemed to end in disaster. Maybe Josie *was* better off without her. “Your men will take her straight to the airport? Do you promise?”

“I promise nothing. Believe me or don’t.”

Bree’s body still shook as they drove out of downtown, eventually leaving the city behind, heading north into the green-shadowed mountains at the center of the island. As they drove through the darkly green hills of Oahu, moonlight illuminated the low-slung clouds kissing the earth. She finally looked at him.

“Josie doesn’t have any money for a plane ticket,” she said in a small voice.

“My men will escort her onto one of my private jets, and she’ll be taken back to the Mainland. A bodyguard already procured her last paycheck from the hotel. And yours, since you no longer need money.”

Bree’s mouth fell open. “I don’t need money? Are you crazy?”

“You are my possession now. I will provide you with everything I feel you require.”

“Oh,” she said in a small voice. She bit her lip. “So you mean you’ll feed me and house me? Like ... like your pet?”

His hands tightened on the steering wheel. “A pet would imply affection. You are more like ... a serf.”

“A serf?” she gasped.

“Just as my ancestors once had in Russia.” He looked at her. “For the rest of your life, you will work for me, Bree. For free. You will never be paid, or allowed to leave. Your only reason for living will be to serve me and give me pleasure.”

Bree swallowed.

“Oh,” she whispered. Good to know where she stood. Setting her jaw, she looked out at the spectacular vista of sharp hills on either side of the Pali Highway, then closed her eyes. At least Josie was free, Bree thought. At least she’d done one thing right before she disappeared forever...

Her eyes flew open. *No*. She sat up straight in her seat. She wasn’t going to give up so easily. She’d find a way to escape her fate. She *would*!

She folded her arms, glaring at him. “Where do you intend to hide me, Vladimir? Because I hardly think your shareholders would approve of slavery. Or *kidnapping*.”

“Kidnapping!” Vladimir spoke a low, guttural word in Russian that was almost certainly a curse. “After so many years of lies, do you even know how to tell the truth?”

“What else would you call it when you—”

“You had the money to pay your sister’s debt. You were free to leave. But you chose to gamble out of pure greed. And now you’re too much of a coward to admit you lost.” He turned to her, his blue eyes like ice in the moonlight. “I let your sister go because you’re the one I want to punish, Bree. Only you.” He gave a slow, cold smile. “And I will.”

CHAPTER THREE

VLADIMIR watched a tumult of emotions cross Bree's beautiful face. Rage. Fury. Grief. And most of all helplessness.

It was like Christmas and his birthday all at once.

Still smiling, he turned back to the deserted, moonlit road and pushed down on the gas of the Lamborghini, causing it to give a low purr as it sped through the lush mountains of Oahu's interior.

When he'd first seen young Josie Dalton at the poker game, getting lured in over her head by the hotel manager, he hadn't recognized her. How could he? He'd never met the kid before. He'd just thought some idiot girl was letting herself get played.

He hadn't liked it, so he'd tried to get her out of the game. An unusually charitable deed for a man who now prided himself on having a cold, flinty diamond instead of a heart.

Once, he'd tried to protect his younger brother. Once, he'd believed in the woman he loved. Now he despised weakness, especially in himself. But three months ago, after nearly dying in a fiery crash on the Honolulu International Raceway, he'd taken his doctor's advice and bought a beach house on a secluded stretch of the Windward Coast, to recuperate.

He'd had no clue Bree was in Hawaii. If he'd known, he'd have gotten up from his hospital bed and walked to the airport, broken bones and all. What man in his right mind would seek out Bree Dalton? That would be like yearning for a plague or other infectious disease.

She was poison, pure and simple. A poison that tasted sweet as sugar and spicy as cinnamon, but once ingested, would destroy a man's body from within, like acid. And that's just what she'd done ten years ago. Her scheming, callous heart had burned Vladimir so badly that she'd sucked all the mercy from his soul.

She'd done him a favor, really. He was better off without a working heart. Being free of sympathy or emotion had helped him build a worldwide business. Helped him get rid of a business partner he no longer wanted.

Bree had betrayed him. But so had his younger brother, in revealing that deception to a newspaper reporter while their first major deal was on the line. Burned, Vladimir had ruthlessly cut his brother out of their company, buying him out for pennies. Then he'd announced his acquisition of mining rights in a newly discovered gold field in northern Siberia. A year later, at twenty-six, Vladimir was worth five hundred million dollars, while his twenty-four-year-old brother was still broke and living in the Moroccan desert.

Though Kasimir hadn't remained penniless for long. Even living like a nomad in the Sahara, thousands of miles from the ice and snow, he'd found a way to start his own mining company, one that now rivaled Xendzov Mining OAO. Vladimir's eyes narrowed. He'd allowed Kasimir to peck away at his business for long enough. It was time for him to destroy his brother once and for all.

But first ...

Vladimir's lips curled as he drove the Lamborghini through the hills toward the Windward Coast. He glanced at Bree out of the corner of his eye.

He'd told himself for years that his memory of her was wrong. No woman could possibly be that lovely, that enticing.

And it was true. She wasn't. At eighteen, she'd still been a girl.

Now, at twenty-eight, she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Her fragility and mystery, mixed with her outward toughness, made her more seductive than ever.

And soon, he'd know her every secret. As they drove down the hills into a lush, green valley, a cold smile lifted Vladimir's lips. He would satisfy his hot memory of her—the thirst that, no matter how many cool blondes he took to his bed, still haunted him in dreams at night. He would satiate himself with her body.

He'd be disappointed by the experience, of course. His memory had amplified her into a goddess of desire. No woman could be that extraordinary. No woman could kiss that well. No woman could set such a fire in his blood. He'd built her up.

He would enjoy cutting her down.

From the moment Vladimir had heard her sultry voice at the poker table, and seen her slender, willowy body in the tight dark jeans and black leather jacket, her hazel eyes like a deep, mysterious forest and her full pink lips like the luring temptation into heaven—or hell—his every nerve ending had become electrified in a way he hadn't felt in a long, long time.

At first he'd thought it was fate. When she'd taken him up on his final bet, he'd realized the two Dalton sisters must have been working some kind of con. It was the only explanation. He could think of no other reason for Bree Dalton, the smartest, sexiest, most ruthless con artist he'd ever met, to be working as an underpaid housekeeper in a five-star Hawaiian resort.

But now he'd teach proud, wicked Bree a lesson she'd never forget. He'd have her as his slave. Scrubbing his floors. And most of all, pleasuring him in bed. He looked at her, at the way her long blond hair glowed in the moonlight, at the fullness of her breasts trembling with each angry breath. Oh, yes.

"Your girlfriend is going to hate you for this," she muttered.

In the distance, Vladimir could see the violet sky growing light pink over the vast dark Pacific. "I don't have a girlfriend."

She glared at him. "Yes, you do."

"Wouldn't I know?"

"What about the woman whose breasts were pressed against your back throughout the poker game?"

"Oh." He tilted his head. "You mean Heather."

"Right. Heather. Won't she object to this little master-slave thing with me?"

He shrugged. "I met her at the pool a few days ago. She was perhaps amusing for a moment, but ..."

"But now you're done with her, so you're heartlessly casting her aside." Bree's jaw set as she turned away. "Typical."

"Do not worry. I have no intention of casting *you* aside," he assured her.

"A famous playboy like you? You'll tire of me in bed after the first night."

He found the hope in her voice insulting. Women did not wish to be cast out of his bed. They begged to get in. Hiding his irritation, he gave her a sensual smile. "Do not fear. If that happens, I'll find some other way for you to serve me. Scrubbing my floors. Cleaning my house ..."

Her cheeks turned a girlish shade of pink, but her voice was steady as she said, "I'd rather clean your bathroom with my *toothbrush* than have you touch me."

"Perhaps I'll have you clean my house naked," he mused.

"Sounds like heaven," she muttered, tossing her head.

Driving along the edge of the coast, he stroked his chin with one hand. "Perhaps I'll allow my men to enjoy the show."

That finally got her. Bree's eyes went wide as her lips parted. "You ..." She swallowed, looking pale. "You wouldn't."

Of course he wouldn't. Vladimir had no intention of sharing his hard-won prize—or even the image of her—with anyone. He wasn't much of a sharer, in any case. A man was stronger alone. With no gaps in his armor. With no one close enough to slow him down, or stab him in the back.

Looking away from Bree's pale, panicked face—somehow he didn't enjoy seeing that expression there as much as he'd thought he would—he turned the Lamborghini into the road to his ultraprivate, palatial Hawaii mansion. The guard nodded at him from the guardhouse and opened the ten-foot-tall electric gate.

“Relax, Bree.” Vladimir ground out the words, keeping his eyes on the road. “I don’t intend to share you. You’re my prize and mine alone.”

In the corner of his eye, he saw her tight shoulders relax infinitesimally. *This is supposed to be her punishment*, he mocked himself. *Why reassure her?*

But frightening her wasn’t what he wanted, he decided. He had no interest in seeing her pitiful and terrified. He wanted to conquer the real Bree—proud and sly and gloriously beautiful. He didn’t want to be tempted, even once, to feel sympathy for her.

Vladimir stopped the red car in the paved courtyard in front of his enormous beachside mansion, built on the edge of a cliff, with one story on the courtyard side, and three stories facing the ocean.

“This is yours?” she breathed.

“Yes.”

“I didn’t know you had a place on Oahu.” She bit her lip, looking up at the house. “If I’d known you were here ...”

“You wouldn’t have come to Honolulu to try your con?”

“Con?” She looked genuinely shocked. “What are you talking about?”

“What do you call that poker game?”

Her big hazel eyes were wide and luminous in the moonlight.

“The worst mistake of my life,” she whispered.

Her heart-shaped face was pale, her pink lips full, her expression agonized. In spite of her tough-girl clothes, the black leather jacket and stiletto boots, she looked like a young, lost princess, trapped by an ogre with no hope of escape.

A trick, he told himself angrily. *Don’t fall for it*. He turned off the ignition. Grabbing her duffel bag, he got out of the car. “Come on.”

Closing the door behind him, he stalked toward the front door without looking back. He’d bought this twenty-million-dollar house three months ago, sight unseen, an hour before he was released from the hospital in Honolulu. The lavish estate on the windward side of the Oahu shore was set on the best private beach near Kailua.

He went into the sprawling beach house, and heard the sound of her stiletto boots on the patterned ohia wood floor. They passed through the large, expansive rooms. Floor-to-ceiling windows on both sides of the house revealed the Ka’iwa Mountain Ridge in one direction, and in the other, the distant pink-and-lavender dawn breaking over the Pacific and the distant Mokulua Islands.

But Vladimir was used to the view. Sick of it, in fact. He’d spent weeks cooped up like a prisoner here, as he recuperated from the car race that had nearly killed him, gritting his teeth through physical therapy. No wonder, within a month of being here, he’d started seeking amusement in Honolulu, half an hour away, at a private poker game. The fact that it was illegal to gamble at any resort in Hawaii just added to the spice.

At the end of the hall, Vladimir opened double doors into the enormous master bedroom, revealing high ceilings, an elegant marble fireplace and a huge four-poster bed. Veranda doors opened to a balcony that overlooked the infinity pool and the ocean beyond it. He dropped Bree’s duffel bag on the bed and abruptly turned to face her.

She ran straight into him.

Vladimir heard her intake of breath as, for one instant, he felt the softness of her body against his own. Electricity coursed through his veins and his heart twisted as all his blood coursed toward his groin. He looked down at her beautiful, shocked face, at her wide hazel eyes, at the way her pink lips parted, full and ripe for plunder.

Mouth parted, she jumped back as if he’d burned her.

“Give a girl some notice, will you,” she snapped, “if you’re just going to whip around like that!”

Her tone was scornful. But it was too late.

He knew.

For years, Vladimir had told himself that their passionate, innocent affair had all been one-sided—that she'd tricked him, creating a hunger and longing in him while she herself remained stone cold, focused only on the money she intended to steal from him. But just now, when he'd felt her body against his, he'd seen her face. Felt the way her body reacted. And he'd suddenly known the truth.

She felt it, too.

"You ... you should ..." Her voice faltered as their eyes locked. As they stood beside the four-poster bed, the brilliant sun burst over the horizon, coming through the tall east-facing windows, bathing them both in warm golden light. Everything he'd ever hungered for, everything he feared and despised, was personified in this one woman. *Breanna*.

Her long blond hair shimmered like diamonds and gold. Her eyes shone a vivid green, like emeralds. Her skin was pale and untouched, like plains of virgin white snow. Hardly aware of what he was doing, Vladimir reached out and stroked a gleaming tendril of her hair. It was impossibly soft.

He heard her soft intake of breath. "Please. Don't."

"Don't?" He looked into her eyes. "You want me," he said in a low voice. "Just as I want you."

Her luscious lips fell open. Then with a scowl, she shook her head fiercely. "You're out of your mind!"

"Don't you recognize the truth when you see it? Or have you forgotten how?"

"The only *truth* is I want you to leave me alone!"

Twining his fingers through her long blond hair, he pulled back, tilting her head to expose her throat.

"Whatever your words say," he whispered, "your lips won't lie."

And he ruthlessly lowered his mouth to hers.

His kiss was an overpowering force, savage enough to bruise. His grip was unyielding, like steel. Bree felt herself being crushed against his hard body.

Kiss? More like plunder. His lips were hard and rough. She felt his powerful hands on her back, felt their warmth through her leather jacket. The muscles of his hard chest crushed her breasts as he wrapped his arms tighter around her. He pushed her lips wider apart with his own, taking full possession of her mouth.

The tip of his tongue touched hers, and it was like two currents of electricity joining in a burst of light. Against her will, repressed desire exploded inside her, and need sizzled down her body like fire.

Her hands somehow stopped pushing against his chest, and lifted to wrap around his neck. It had been so long since she'd been touched by anyone, and he was the only man who'd ever kissed her. The only one she'd ever wanted. The man she'd loved with all her heart, the man who'd brought her to life and made her new.

Vladimir. As he kissed her, she sighed softly against his mouth. For ten long years, she'd dreamed of him every aching night. And now, at last, her dream was real. She was in his arms, he was kissing her....

But he'd never kissed her like this before. There was nothing loving about this embrace. It was scornful. Angry.

One of his legs pushed her thighs apart. His hands moved up to entwine his fingers in her hair, yanking her head back.

"No," she whimpered, feeling dizzy as she wrenched away. She put an unsteady hand to her forehead. "No."

Vladimir stared down at her. His gaze seemed almost bewildered. She heard the hard rasp of his breath, and realized that he, too, had been surprised. Then his face hardened.

"Why should I not kiss you?" He walked slowly around her, running one hand up her arm and the side of her neck. "You belong to me now, *kroshka*."

Kroshka? She didn't know what it meant, but it didn't sound very nice.

Stopping in front of her, he cupped her chin. He handled her carelessly, possessively, as a man might handle any valuable possession—a rifle, a jewel, a horse. Insolently, he traced his hand down her bare neck. “I intend to take full possession of my prize.” His hand slid over her black T-shirt to the hollow between her breasts. “Soon you will be spread across my bed. Aching for me.” His hand continued to slide down her waist. Gripping her hip, he suddenly pulled her hard against his body. “Your only reason to exist now is to serve me.”

Shaking, she tried to toss her head. Tried to defy him. Instead, her voice trembled as she asked, “What are you going to do to me?”

“Whatever I please.” He moved his hand up her body, cupping her breast over the T-shirt, tweaking her aching nipple with his thumb. As she gasped, he smiled. “But you will please me, Bree. Have no doubt about that.”

She wanted to beg him to let her go. But she knew it would do no good. Vladimir’s handsome, chiseled face was hard as granite. There was no mercy in it. But she couldn’t stop herself from choking out, “Please don’t do this.”

“My touch wasn’t always so distasteful to you,” he said softly. He ran his hands down her shoulders, pulling off her black leather jacket and dropping it to the marble bedroom floor. “Once, you shuddered beneath me. You wanted me so badly you wept.”

Bree swallowed. She’d once been sure of only two things on earth: that Vladimir Xendzov was the last honorable man in this selfish, cynical world. And that he loved her.

“Ya tebya lyublyu,” he’d whispered. *I love you, Breanna. Be my wife. Be mine forever.*

He’d been a different man then, a man who laughed easily, who held her tenderly, a fellow orphan who looked at her with worship in his eyes. Now, his handsome face was a lifetime harder. He was a different man, hard and rough as an unpolished diamond, his blue gaze as cold as the place that had been his frequent home for the past ten years—Siberia.

His grip on her tightened as he said huskily, “Do you not remember?”

Blinking fast, she whispered, “That was when I loved you.”

His hands grew still.

“You must think I’m a fool.” Dropping his arms, he said coldly, “I know you never loved me. You loved my money, nothing more.”

“It might have started as a con,” she said tearfully, “but it changed to something more. I’m telling you the truth. I loved—”

“Say those words again,” he exclaimed, cutting her off in a low, dangerous voice, “and you’ll regret it.”

She straightened her spine and looked at him defiantly.

“I loved you,” she cried. “With all my heart!”

“Be quiet!” With a low growl, he pushed her back violently against the bedpost. “Not another word!”

Bree’s heart pounded as she saw the fury in his eyes. She could feel the hard wood against her back, feel his chest against hers with the quick rise and fall of her every breath.

Abruptly, he released her.

“Why did you really come to Hawaii?” he said in a low voice.

She blinked fast, able to exhale. “We got offered jobs here, and we needed them.”

He shook his head, his jaw tight. “Why would you take a job as a housekeeper? With your skills?” His eyes narrowed. “You were surprised to see me at the poker table. If you’re not here to con me, who was your mark?”

“No one! I told you—I don’t do that anymore!”

“Right,” he said sarcastically. “Because you’re honest and pure.”

His nasty tone cut her to the heart, but she raised her chin. “What are *you* doing here? Because the last time I checked, there weren’t many gold mines on Oahu!”

He stared at her for a long moment. “Do you truly not know?” His forehead furrowed. “It was in the news....”

“I’ve spent the last decade *avoiding* news about you, chief. Not looking for it!”

“Three months ago, I was in an accident,” he said tightly. “Racing on the Honolulu International Speedway.”

An accident? As in—hurt?

She looked him over anxiously, but saw no sign of injury. Catching his eye, she scowled. “Too bad it didn’t kill you.”

“Yes. Too bad.” His voice was cold. “I am fine now. I was planning to return to St. Petersburg tomorrow.”

Her heart leaped with sudden hope. “So you’re leaving—”

“I’m not in any hurry.” He gripped her wrists again. “Nice try changing the subject. Tell me why you came here. Who is your mark? If not me, then who?”

“No one!”

“You expect me to believe we met by coincidence?”

She bared her teeth. “More like bad luck!”

“Bad luck,” he muttered. He moved closer to her, and his grip tightened. She felt tingles down her body, felt his closeness as he pressed her against the carved wooden post of the bed. His gaze fell to her lips.

“No,” she whispered. “Please.” She swallowed, then lifted her gaze. “You said ... I could just clean the house....”

He stared at her. His blue eyes were wide as the infinite blue sea. Then he abruptly let her go.

“As you wish,” he said coldly. “On your back in my bed, or breaking it scrubbing my floor—it makes little difference to me. Be downstairs in five minutes.”

Turning on his heel, he left the bedroom. Bree’s knees nearly collapsed, and she fell back against the bed.

Vladimir didn’t believe she’d ever loved him. When he’d abandoned her to the sheriff that cold December night in Alaska, he’d truly believed that her love for him had just been an act. And now he was determined to exact revenge.

His punishing, soul-destroying kiss had been just the start. An appetizer. He intended to enjoy her humiliation like a lengthy gourmet meal, taking each exquisite course at his own leisure. He would feast on her pride, her body, her soul, her memories, her youth, her heart—until nothing was left but an empty shell.

With a silent sob, Bree dropped her face in her hands.

She was in real trouble.

CHAPTER FOUR

SEVEN hours later, Bree had never felt so sweaty and filthy in her life.

And she was glad.

With a sigh, she squeezed her sponge over the bucket of soapy water. There was still almost no dirt—she guessed Vladimir's team of servants had cleaned the place top to bottom the day before. But he'd still made her scrub every inch of the enormous house's marble floor. She narrowed her eyes. Tyrannical man. Her back ached, as did her arms and legs. But—and this was the part she was happy about—she'd done it all with her clothes on. He'd thought a little cleaning could humiliate her?

Leaning back on her haunches, Bree rubbed her cheek with her shoulder and smiled at the newly shining kitchen floor.

This house was a beautiful place, she'd give him that. Glancing through the windows as she'd worked all day, surreptitiously plotting her escape, she'd seen an Olympic-sized infinity pool clinging to the edge of the ocean cliff. On the other side of the house, across the tennis courts, she'd seen a cluster of small cottages on the edge of the compound, where she guessed Vladimir's invisible army of servants lived. Yes. She'd never seen such an amazing villa estate before.

But for all its luxury, it was still a prison. Just as, for all of Vladimir's dark, brooding good looks, he was her jailer.

She scowled, recalling how he'd enjoyed watching her on all fours, scrubbing his home office that morning. Her stomach had growled with hunger as Vladimir ate a lavish breakfast, served on a tray at his desk. The delicious smells of coffee and bacon had been torture to Bree, following a night where she'd had no food and barely two hours' sleep. His housekeeper, after watching with dismay, had disappeared. But Bree was proud of herself that she hadn't given Vladimir the satisfaction of seeing her whimper.

No more whimpering, she vowed.

Bree jumped as Vladimir suddenly stalked into the kitchen, his posture angry. He stomped into the room and opened one of the doors of the big refrigerator.

Biting her lip, she looked away, scrubbing the floor harder with her sponge. But he was making so much noise, she glanced at him out of the corner of her eye.

He grabbed homemade bread from the cupboard and ripped off a hunk. Tossing it onto a plate, he chopped through it with a big knife, like a grim executioner with an ax. She gulped, watching in bewilderment as he added cheese, chicken, even mustard and tomato. He opened the fridge and added a bottle of water and then a linen napkin to the tray. His Italian leather shoes were heavy against the marble floor as he came over to her, holding out the tray with a glower.

"Your lunch," he said coldly.

Her belly rumbled in response. She'd had nothing to eat since a cheerless Christmas dinner yesterday, a bologna sandwich eaten alone at the end of her housekeeping shift. Sitting back on her haunches, Bree wiped her sweaty forehead and looked up at him.

Unlike her, Vladimir had taken a shower, and looked sleek, urbane and civilized in a freshly pressed black button-down shirt and black trousers. His tanned skin glowed with health, smelling faintly of soap and sandalwood.

While she ...

She wasn't feeling so pretty. She'd peeled off her boots to work barefoot on the wet floor. Her long blond hair was twisted into a messy knot at the back of her head, to lift it off her hot neck. Her T-shirt was sweaty all the way through, and in the humidity of Hawaii, even with air-conditioning she knew she looked like a swamp creature from a 1950s horror movie.

She narrowed her eyes. If he thought she was going to lick his boots with gratitude for the simple courtesy of lunch, he had another think coming. His *serf*!

She looked at the tray. He waited.

"I don't like tomatoes," she said pleasantly.

Vladimir dropped the tray with a noisy clatter on the floor beside her. "Tough. I have no desire to cater to you, and Mrs. Kalani decided to take the rest of the day off."

Bree looked up at him, and a slow grin lifted her cheeks. "She gave you a hard time about me, didn't she?"

"Enjoy your lunch." He pointed to an immaculate section of the floor. "You missed a spot."

Vladimir had thrown the tray down as if she were the family golden retriever. Rising to her feet after he left, she washed her hands, then took the tray to the dining table like a civilized person, ready for a fight if he came back to give her one. Somewhat to her disappointment, he didn't.

Once she'd removed the tomatoes, the freshly baked bread made the rest of the sandwich delicious. Honey mustard was a nice touch, too. And the cold, sparkling water was just what she'd wanted. She wiped her mouth.

He was still a brute. Her eyes narrowed as she remembered his cold words.

For the rest of your life, you will work for me, Bree. For free. You will never be paid, or allowed to leave. Your only goal, until you die, is to serve me and give me pleasure.

He didn't know who he was dealing with. She finished off the cold water and tidied up the tray. He thought a little housecleaning would kill her? She'd been training for this for the past ten years.

She was going to escape this captivity. As soon as she could formulate a plan.

As the afternoon wore on, Bree scrubbed her way fiercely up the stairs and then cleaned five guest bedrooms, which had already been as sparkling clean as the rest of the house. But as she reached the master bedroom, the sun was starting to lower in the western sky, and her whole body ached. She couldn't stop yawning. Looking at the four-poster bed, she was tempted to take a short power nap. Vladimir would never know, she told herself. Climbing onto the large, soft bed, she closed her eyes—just for a few minutes.

With a gasp, Bree sat up suddenly in bed. The room was now dark. She looked over at the clock. It was almost seven o'clock. Dinnertime.

She'd slept for hours.

Feeling sweaty and gross, her body aching, Bree rose stiffly from the still-made bed, stretching her arms over her head. She rubbed her eyes with her knuckles. So where was her slave driver? Why hadn't he discovered her napping? Tsar Vladimir the Terrible must be hard at work, she decided, planning a new way to humiliate her, or dreaming up some nefarious new attack on his brother. When she'd been cleaning his home office, he'd been talking rather intensely in Russian on the phone. But even then, his smoldering gaze had slowly wandered over her backside as she scrubbed the floors on all fours.

Fine. Let him look.

With a deep breath, Bree closed her eyes. As long as he didn't touch. As long as she didn't have to feel his lips, hot and hard against her own, as he held her so tightly against his body ...

"You're awake."

At the sound of Vladimir's husky voice from the doorway, she jumped, whirling around. "You—you knew I was sleeping?" she stammered.

His gaze was intense as he came toward her. "Yes."

She felt suddenly very small as his tall body loomed over hers. She licked her lips. "So why didn't you wake me up and start bossing me around?"

Reaching out, he brushed a tendril of hair out of her eyes. "Because you looked like an angel."

His voice was low. Sensual. Bree's eyes widened as she looked up—no, not at his lips! His eyes! Trembling with awareness at how they were once again alone in his bedroom, she tightened her hands at her sides. "Um. Thanks. For letting me borrow your bed." She edged away from it. "I should probably be getting back to work...."

His eyes glimmered. “*Our* bed.”

“What?”

Vladimir’s large hand wrapped around the post’s polished wood. “You called it my bed. It is ours.”

Her lips parted. Then she folded her arms protectively against her chest. “Look. Whatever our wager was, you can’t actually expect me to ...”

“Expect you to what?”

“Sleep with you.”

“You were serious when you offered it as a prize.” He looked down at her. “‘My skills at cards are nothing compared to what I can do to you in bed,’ you said.” His tone was mocking. “‘A single hour with me will change your whole life,’ you said!”

Shivering, she looked away. “I was bluffing,” she said in a small voice. “I don’t know how to do those things.” Her cheeks colored, and shame burned through her as she looked at the marble floor. “I’ve never been with a man before. I’ve never even kissed a man—since ...” She bit her lip and muttered, “Not since you.”

He stared at her. “You’re a *virgin*?”

His voice dripped disbelief. A lump rose to her throat, and she nodded.

“Right,” he said scornfully. “You’re a virgin.”

She lifted her head in outrage. “You think I’m a liar?”

“I know you are.” His cool blue eyes met hers. “You lie about everything. You can’t help it. Lying is in your blood.”

Lying is in your blood. Before Bree’s mother died, her parents had been regular law-abiding citizens, childhood sweethearts married at eighteen, high school teachers who mowed the lawn in Alaska’s short, bright summers and shoveled snow through eight-month winters. Her mother had taught English, her father science. Then, at thirty, Lois Dalton had contracted cancer. Newly pregnant with her second child, she’d put off chemo treatments that might risk her baby. Two months after Josie’s birth, Lois had died. Jack Dalton lost his wife, his best friend and, some said, his mind....

He’d quit his job as a teacher. He left the new baby with a sitter. And every day, after he picked up Bree from first grade, he took her to backroom poker games. First in Anchorage, and then to ports where Alaskan cruises deposited new tourists each day. With each success, his plans had grown more daring. And they’d worked. At first.

Pushing the memory aside, Bree shook her head. “I’m not lying. I’m a virgin!”

“Stop it. You made the bet. You made your bed.” Vladimir lightly trailed his hand above her head, along the carved wooden post. “Now you will sleep in it.”

She glared at him, setting her jaw. “I only made that bet because I was desperate—because I had nothing else remotely valuable to offer! For Josie—”

“Josie was safe. You had more than enough.”

A sudden thought struck Bree, and she caught her breath. “Did you ... let me win?” she whispered. “Is that why you kept raising the stakes—why you egged me on during the game? So that I could cover Josie’s debt?”

His jaw tightened. “I thought she was some innocent kid that Hudson had lured into the game. Not like you.” His eyes flashed as he looked down at Bree. “You could have walked away. But when I offered you the one-card gamble, you accepted. There was no desperation. It was pure greed. And it told me what I needed to know.”

She swallowed. “What?”

“That you hadn’t changed. You were still using your body as bait.”

She took a deep breath and whispered, “I never thought in a million years that I would lose that game.” Exhaustion suddenly swamped her like a wave. Tears rose to her eyes. “And if you were any kind of decent man, you would never expect me to actually ...”

“To what? Follow through on your promise?” He gave a hard laugh. “No, what kind of monster would expect that?”

Bree exhaled. “How stupid can I be, appealing to your better nature?”

“I won. You lost.” He folded his arms, staring at her with his eyes narrowed. “You have many, many faults, Bree Dalton. Almost too many to count. In fact, your faults are like grains of sand on a beach that stretches across the whole wide world ...”

“All right, I get it,” she muttered. “You don’t exactly admire me.”

“... but I never thought,” he continued, his eyes glinting, “that you’d be a sore loser.”

Bree stared up at him mutinously. Then, setting her jaw, she turned away and stomped over to the bucket of cold water. She snatched up the scraggly sponge and held it up like a sword.

“Fine,” she snapped. “What do you want me to scrub? The bottom of your Lamborghini? The concrete around the pool? A patch of mud by the garden? I don’t even care. But we both know your house is already *clean*!”

His sensual mouth curved at the edges. Gently, he took the sponge out of her hand and dropped it with a soft splash into the bucket. “You can stop cleaning anytime you want.”

She searched his eyes. “I can?”

He put his hands on her shoulders, looking down at her.

“Come to bed with me,” he said quietly.

Flashes of heat went up and down her body. His hands on her shoulders were heavy, sensual, like points of light. With an intake of breath, she ripped herself away from him.

“Dream on,” she said, tossing her head with every ounce of bravado she possessed.

He shrugged. “Then I’ll have to find some other way to make you useful.”

Bree started to reach for the bucket and sponge, but he stopped her. “No. You are right. Enough cleaning.” He gave a sudden wicked grin. “You will cook for me.”

Her jaw dropped. He must have forgotten the last time she’d cooked for him, taking a romantic date idea from a magazine. It had been romantic, all right—she’d nearly burned the cabin down, and then the firemen had been called. “You can’t be serious.”

Vladimir lifted a dark eyebrow. “Because you’re still a terrible cook?”

She glared at him. “Because you know I would poison you!”

“I know you won’t, because we will share the meal.” He leaned forward and said softly, “Tonight I am craving ... something delicious.” She saw the edge of his tongue flick the corner of his sensual lips. “Something sinful.”

Even though he was talking about food, his low voice caused a shiver of awareness down her spine. She swallowed.

“Well, were you thinking chicken noodle soup from a can?” she suggested weakly. “Because I know how to make that.”

“Tempting. But no.” He tilted his head. “A goat cheese soufflé with Provençal herbs.”

Her mouth dropped. “Are you kidding?”

“Try it.” His lips turned up at the corners. “You might like it.”

“I might like to eat it, but I can’t cook it!”

“If you cook it, I will allow you to have some.”

“Generous of you.”

“Of course.” Innocently, he spread his arms wide. “What am I, some kind of heartless brute?”

“You really want me to answer that?”

He gave a low, wicked laugh. “It’s a beautiful night. You will come out onto the lanai and cook for me.”

“Fine.” She looked at him dubiously. “It’s your funeral.”

And so half an hour later, Bree found herself on the patio beside the pool, in the sheltered outdoor kitchen, struggling to sauté garlic and flour in garlic oil.

“This recipe is ridiculous!” She sneezed violently as minced thyme sprinkled the air like snowflakes, instead of coating the melted butter in the soufflé pan. “It’s meant for four cooks and a sous-chef, not one person!”

Vladimir, who sat at the large granite table with an amazing view of the sunset-swept Pacific beyond the infinity pool, sipped an extremely expensive wine as he read a Russian newspaper. “You’re exaggerating. For a clever woman like you, surely arranging a few herbs and whipping up a few eggs is not so difficult. How hard can it be to chop and sauté?”

She waved her knife at him furiously. “Come a little closer and I’ll show you!”

“Stop complaining,” he said coldly, taking another sip of merlot.

“Oh,” Bree gasped, realizing she was supposed to be whisking flour and garlic in the hot olive oil. She tried to focus, not wanting to let Vladimir break her, but cooking had never been her skill. Supervising a kitchen staff? No problem. Cracking the eggs herself? A huge mess. She suddenly smelled burning oil, and remembered she was supposed to keep stirring the milk and white wine in the pan until it boiled. As she rushed across the outdoor kitchen, her bare feet slid on an egg white she’d spilled earlier. She skidded, then slipped, and as her tailbone slammed against the tile floor, the whisked egg yolks in her bowl flew up in the air before landing, wet and sticky, in her hair.

Suddenly, Vladimir was kneeling beside her. “Are you hurt, Breanna?”

She stared at him. She felt his powerful arms around her, protective and strong, as he lifted her to her feet.

Trembling, Bree stared up at him, wide-eyed. “You called me Breanna.”

He stiffened. Abruptly, he released her.

“It is your name,” he said coldly.

Without his arms encircling her, she felt suddenly cold and shivery and—alone. For a moment she’d seen an emotion flicker in his eyes that had made her wonder if he ...

No. She’d been wrong. He didn’t care about her. Whatever feelings he’d once had for her had disappeared at the first sign of trouble.

Right?

Bree had certainly never intended to love him. The night they’d met, she’d known him only as the young CEO of a start-up mining company, whose family had once owned the land her father had bought in trust for Josie a few years before. “Promise me,” Black Jack had wheezed from the hospital bed, before he died. “Promise me you’ll always take care of your sister.”

In her desperation to be free and keep Josie safe, Bree had known she’d do anything to get the money she needed. And the best way to make Vladimir Xendzov careless about his money was to make him care about her. To dazzle him.

But from the moment they’d met, Bree had been the one who was dazzled. She’d never met a man like Vladimir: so honest, so open, so protective. For the first time in her life, she’d seen the possibilities of a future beyond the next poker game. She’d seen she could be something more than a cheap con artist with a rusted heart. He’d called her by her full name, Breanna, and made her feel brand-new. *I love you, Breanna. Be my wife. Be mine forever.*

Now she blinked, staring up at him in the deepening twilight Vladimir was practically scowling at her, his arms folded, his blue eyes dark.

But the way he’d said her name when he’d held her ... His voice had sounded the same as ten years ago. Exactly the same.

Vladimir growled a low Russian curse. “You’re a mess. Go take a shower. Wash the food out of your hair. Get clean clothes.” He snatched the empty saucepan from her hand. “Just go. I will finish this.”

Now, that was truly astonishing. “You—you will cook?”

“You are even more helpless in the kitchen than I remembered,” he said harshly. “Go. I left new clothes for you in the bedroom upstairs. Get cleaned up. Return in a more presentable state.”

Bree's lips were parted as she stared at him. He was actually being nice to her. No matter how harsh his tone, or how he couched his kindness inside insults, there could be no doubt. He was allowing her to take a shower, to change into clean clothes, like a guest. Not a slave.

Why? What could he possibly gain by kindness, when he held all the power? "Thank you." She swallowed. "I really appreciate—"

"Save it." He cut her off. Setting down the pan on the granite island of the outdoor kitchen, he looked at her. "At least until you see the dress I've left on your bed. Take a shower and put it on. Afterwards, come back here." He gave her a hard, sensual smile. "And then ... then you can thank me."

Vladimir should have known not to make her cook.

He'd thought that Bree, at age twenty-eight, might have improved her skills. No. If possible, she'd grown even more hopeless in the kitchen. The attempt had been a complete disaster, even before the raw yolks had been flung all over—perhaps a merciful end before they could be added to the burned, lumpy mess in the sauté pan.

Cleaning up, he dumped it all out and started fresh. Forty minutes later, he sat at the table on the patio and tasted his finished soufflé, and gave a satisfied sigh.

He would not ask Bree to make food again.

Vladimir knew how to cook. He just preferred not to. When he was growing up, his family had had nothing. His father tried his best to keep up the six-hundred-acre homestead, but he'd had his head in the clouds—the kind of man who would be mulling over a book of Russian philosophy and not notice that their newborn calf had just wandered away from its mother to die in a snowdrift. Vladimir's mother, a former waitress from the Lower Forty-Eight, had been a little in awe of her intellectual husband, with his royal background. Her days were spent cleaning up the messes her absentminded spouse left behind, to make sure they had enough wood to get through the winter, and food for their two growing boys. It was because of their father's influence that Vladimir and Kasimir had both applied to one of the oldest mining schools in Europe, in St. Petersburg. It was because of their mother's influence they'd managed to pay for it, but in a way that had broken her husband's heart. And that was nothing compared to how Vladimir had found the money to start Xendzov Mining OAO twelve years ago. That had been the spark that started the brothers' war. That had caused Kasimir to turn on him so viciously.

Vladimir's eyes narrowed. His brother deserved what he'd gotten—being cut out of the company right before it would have made him insanely rich. He, Vladimir, had deserved to own the company free and clear.

Just as he owned Bree Dalton.

He had a sudden memory of her stricken hazel eyes, of her pale, beautiful face.

You called me Breanna.

Rising from his chair, Vladimir paced three steps across the patio. He stopped, staring at the moonlight sparkling across the pool and the ocean beyond.

She really must think he was a fool. She must have no respect whatsoever for his intelligence, to think that she could look at him with those beautiful luminous eyes and make him believe she'd actually loved him once. It would not work. They both knew it had always been about money for her. It still was.

I've never been with a man before. I've never even kissed a man since you.

Reaching for his wine glass, he took a long drink and then wiped his mouth. She was a fairly good liar, he'd give her that. But he was immune to her now. Absolutely immune. Except for her body.

He'd enjoyed watching her scrub his floors, watching the sway of her slender hips, of her backside and breasts as she knelt in front of him. He'd wanted to take her, then and there.

And he would. Soon.

Their kiss had been electric. He still shuddered to remember the softness of her body as she'd clung to him. The scent of her, like orchids and honey. The sweet, erotic taste of her lips. He'd intended to punish her with that savage kiss. Instead, he'd been lost in it, in memory, in yearning, in hot ruthless need.

Gritting his teeth, he roughly tidied up the outdoor kitchen, slamming the dirty pans into the sink. No matter how he tried to deny it, Bree still had power over him. Too much. When he'd seen her slip and fall on this floor, her cry had sliced straight through his heart. And suddenly, without knowing how, he'd found himself beside her, helping her to her feet.

You called me Breanna.

Irritated, he exhaled, setting his jaw. He glanced up toward the house. It had been almost an hour. What was taking her so long?

He grabbed a plate and served her a portion of the soufflé, then took a crystal goblet from the cupboard on the lanai. He carried them both over to the tray on the granite table, beside the open bottle of merlot. He looked out at the shimmering pool, at the crashing waves of the dark ocean below the cliff. He tried to relax his shoulders, to take a deep breath.

After he'd nearly died in the car crash on the raceway, his doctor had arrived from St. Petersburg and told him he needed to find a less risky way to relax. "You're thirty-five years old, Your Highness," the doctor had said gravely. "But you have the blood pressure of a much older man. You're a heart attack waiting to happen." So Vladimir, wrapped up in bandages over his broken bones, had grimly promised to give up car racing forever, along with boxing and skydiving. He'd bought this house and started physical rehabilitation. He'd done yoga and tai chi.

Or at least he'd tried.

He hadn't made it through a single yoga class. The more he tried to calm down, the more he felt the vein in his neck throb until his forehead was covered with sweat. The pain of doing nothing, of just sitting alone with his thoughts, left him half-mad, like a tiger trapped in a cage.

He'd done extreme sports because they made him feel something. The adrenaline stirred up by thinking he might die was a reminder that he was still alive. The never ending sameness of his work, of one meaningless love affair after another, sometimes made him forget.

And *yoga* was supposed to relax him? Vladimir grumbled beneath his breath. Stupid doctors. What did they know?

He'd already had twelve weeks of twiddling his thumbs, "healing" as ordered, while knowing his brother was in Morocco, tying up various gold and diamond sources in underhanded ways. When his leg had healed enough for him to drive, Vladimir had bought the new Lamborghini to go to the weekly private poker game at the Hale Ka'nani Resort. Then he'd found Bree, who drove him absolutely insane. Even more than yoga.

But what the hell was taking her so long? The dinner he'd made was growing cold. Scowling, he looked up at the second-floor bedroom balcony. How long could it take for a woman to shower?

"Bree," he yelled. "Come down."

"No," he heard her yell back from the open French doors of the balcony.

He set his jaw. "Right now!"

"Forget it! I'm not wearing this thing!"

"Then you won't eat!"

"Fine by me!"

This dinner wasn't going at all as he'd envisioned. Growling to himself, Vladimir left the dinner tray on the table and raced inside. Taking the stairs two at a time, he went down the hall and shoved open the double doors to the master bedroom, knocking them back against the walls.

Bree whirled around with a gasp.

Vladimir took one look and his mouth went slack. His heart nearly stopped in his chest.

She stood half-naked, wearing the expensive lingerie, a pale pink teddy and silk robe he'd had a servant buy for her in Kailua. "Make it tacky," Vladimir had instructed. "The sort of thing a stripper might wear."

He'd meant to humiliate her. In spite of Bree's corrupt, hollow soul, she'd always dressed modestly. She never showed any skin—ever. Even when she'd done her best to entice the men at the poker game, she'd lured them with her words, with her electrifying voice, with her angelic face and slender body. But she'd been completely covered from head to toe, with jeans and a leather jacket.

Vladimir had never seen this much of her bare skin. Not even the night ten years ago when he'd proposed, when they would have made love if they hadn't been interrupted. The lingerie should have looked slutty. It didn't.

The pale pink color reflected the blush on her cheeks. She looked innocent and young. Like a bride on her wedding night.

Anger and frustration rushed through him. Each time he tried to humiliate Bree or teach her a lesson, she stymied him.

Furious, he crossed the bedroom. Reaching out his hand, he heard her intake of breath as he ripped off the short silken robe, dropping it to the floor. His eyes raked over the creamy skin of her bare shoulders. The slip of silk beneath barely reached the tops of her thighs, and the flimsy bodice revealed most of the curves of her breasts. He saw the thrust of her nipples through the silk, and was instantly hard.

Bree's cheeks burned red as she glared at him. "Are you happy?"

"No," he growled. He roughly pulled her into his arms. "But I will be."

Her eyes glittered. "So you won me in a poker game. Is this what you wanted, Vladimir? To make me look like your whore?"

He saw the shimmer in her eyes, the vulnerability on her beautiful face, heard the heart-stopping tremble of her voice, and felt that same strange twist in his chest. *It's nothing more than an act to manipulate me*, he told himself fiercely. Damn her!

"You sold yourself to me of your own free will," he growled. "What other word would you use to describe a woman who does such a thing?"

He heard the furious intake of her breath, saw the rapid rise and fall of her chest. But as she drew her hand back to slap him, he caught her wrist.

"Typical feminine reaction," he observed coldly. "I expected more of you."

"How about this," she hissed, ripping her arm away. Her damp blond hair slid against the bare skin of her shoulders. *"I hate you."*

His lips curled. "Good."

"I wish to God we'd never met. That any man but you had won me." Her eyes flashed fire. "I'd rather be right now in the bed of any man at the table—"

Her voice ended with a choke as he yanked her against his body. "So you admit, then, that you are exactly as I've said. A liar, a cheat and a whore."

Her beautiful hazel eyes widened beneath the dark fringe of lashes. Then she swallowed and looked down. "I was a liar, yes, and a cheat, too, but never—never the other," she said in a small voice. She shook her head. "I haven't tried to con anyone for ten years. You changed me." Her dark lashes rose. "You made me a better person," she whispered. The pain and bewilderment in her eyes made her seem suddenly young and fragile and sad. "And you left."

And he felt it again—the tight twist in the place where his heart should have been. As if he were an ogre standing over a poor peasant girl with a whip.

No! Damn it! He wouldn't feel sorry for her!

He'd show her that her overt display of a wobbly lower lip and big hazel eyes had no effect on him whatsoever!

Bree Dalton didn't have feelings, he told himself fiercely. Just masks. He glared at her. "Stop it."

“What?”

“Your ridiculous attempt to gain my sympathy. It—”

It won't work, he meant to say, but his throat closed as he was distracted by the rise and fall of her breasts in the tiny slip of blush-colored silk when she breathed. He could see the shape of her nipples and the way they trembled with every hard breath.

And he was rock hard. Their mutual dislike somehow only made him desire her more, to almost unsustainable need. What magnetic control did she have over his body? Why did he want her like this? She was a confessed liar, a con artist. She wished she'd lost her body to any man but him. How could he want her still? It was almost as if she wasn't his slave at all, but he was hers.

And that enraged him most of all.

A low growl came from the back of his throat. He was in control. Not her.

His hands tightened into fists, his jaw clenching. He wanted to push Bree against the bed, to kiss her hard, to plunge himself inside her and make her scream with pleasure. He wanted to make her explode with pure ecstasy, even while she hated him. A grim smile curved his lips. She would despise herself for that, which would be sweet indeed.

But when he took her, it would be in his own time. At his free choice. Not because she'd driven him to madness by her taunts and the seductive sway of her nubile body.

He wouldn't let her conquer him.

His shoulders ached with tension as he turned away, fighting for self-control. He looked around the master bedroom with a derisive curl on his lip. “I can see you did not finish scrubbing this floor before you took your long lazy nap. You will finish it now. While I watch.”

Her expression changed. Snatching up the frayed sponge, she grabbed the bucket of cold wash water from the floor and, in a posture of clear fury, knelt down. He watched her slender, delectable body, wearing only the tiny slip of pink silk, moving back and forth on all fours as she scrubbed the floor. His mouth went dry.

Bree looked up.

“Enjoying the show?” she said coldly.

Without a word, Vladimir turned and left the bedroom. He returned a moment later with his own dinner tray and red wine. Still not speaking, he sat down in a cushioned chair near the marble fireplace. Calmly he unfolded his fine linen napkin across his lap.

“Now I am,” he replied.

Sitting back comfortably in his chair, he took a sip of merlot. He had the satisfaction of seeing her eyes widen, of seeing her scowl. Then she turned back to her work, and he had the even greater satisfaction of watching Bree on all fours, her body frosted with silvery moonlight, scrubbing his floor with a sponge and a pail of water.

Outside the veranda window, the full moon lit up the shimmering dark Pacific. The large master bedroom was full of shadows, lit only by a single lamp near his massive four-poster bed. With the flick of a remote, Vladimir turned on the gas fireplace, adding soft flickering firelight to better see his dinner—and the floor show. His solid silver knife and fork slid noisily against the pure bone china, edged with 24 karat gold, as he cut the Provençal goat cheese and Gruyère soufflé. Watching her, he took a bite.

It was exquisite. He sighed in true, deep pleasure.

“Tasty?” Bree muttered, not looking at him.

“You have no idea.” His homemade soufflé was indeed delicious, but he wasn't referring to the food.

“I hope you choke and die,” she said sweetly.

“Don't forget the area by the bed.” He watched Bree's nearly naked body shimmy as she scrubbed. His eyes ran along her slender, toned legs, the sweet curve of her backside, her plump

breasts hanging down as they swayed, barely covered by the whisper-thin silk hanging from her shoulders.

Hmm. He didn't want to enjoy it *this* much. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, moving his plate closer to his knees.

"Of course, *Your Highness*." Giving him an *I-wish-you-were-dead* glare, Bree stomped—if a woman could be said to stomp while she was crawling—over to the foot of the bed, dragging the bucket behind her. It changed her body's position, giving Vladimir an entirely different view.

He was now sitting directly behind her. All he needed to do was get down on his knees, grab her hips in his hands and pull her sweet bottom back against his groin. It was suddenly all he could think about.

You're in control, he ordered himself. *Not her*.

But his body wasn't listening. A bead of sweat formed on his forehead. His hands clenched on the silver tray in his lap. Well, why not just take her? Bree was his property. His serf. His slave. She'd sold herself to him freely, taunting him with her sexual skill. *You have no idea what I can do to you*. An untouched virgin—Bree? Impossible. She was an experienced seductress. He'd wanted her. Waited for her. For ten years. So what was stopping him?

Vladimir watched the bounce of her breasts and slow up-and-down motion of her hips as she scrubbed the floor angrily.

Not a damned thing.

He heard a loud crash of breaking china. He'd risen to his feet without even knowing it. The tray had fallen from his lap, and his dinner was now a mess of broken crockery.

At the noise, Bree leaned back on her haunches, brushing a tendril of hair out of her face with her shoulder. Turning her luscious body in the tiny, clinging silk teddy, she glared at him. "I'm not cleaning that."

Then she saw the look in his eyes. Twisting away with an intake of breath, she started to scrub the floor again. This time with enough panicked force to dig right through the marble to the house's foundation and straight through the earth to Russia.

He stepped over the broken china. He stopped behind her. He fell to his knees.

"I'm not done," she choked out.

Wrapping his body around her back, he reached in front of her. He put his larger hand over hers, forcing the sponge to be still. His hand tightened as she tried, without success, to keep scrubbing. Caught between two opposing forces, the sponge ripped apart.

Bewildered, she leaned back with half a sponge in her hand. "Look what you did," she said, blinking fast. "You destroyed it. After everything it tried to do for you ..."

"Bree," he said in a low voice.

Dropping the sponge, she closed her eyes, wrapping her arms around her shivering body. "Don't ..."

But he was ruthless. Grabbing her hips with both hands, he pulled her body back against his own. He felt the rapid, panicked rise and fall of her ribs beneath the chain of his arms. Felt the sweet softness of her backside pressing into his hard, aching groin.

Slowly she opened her eyes and twisted her head to glance at him. Her skin was flushed, her cheeks pink. Her lips parted. He saw the nervous flicker of her tongue against the corner of her mouth.

And he could bear it no longer.

Roughly turning her in his arms, he pulled her to face him, body to body. Twining his hands in her tangled hair, he savagely lowered his mouth to hers.

For an instant, she stiffened. Then, with a little anguished cry, her lips melted against his own. She wrapped her arms around him, and in a rush, their grip tightened as they embraced in the devouring passion of a decade's hunger.

CHAPTER FIVE

BREE had to push him away. She should. She *must*.
She couldn't.

His kiss was hard, even angry—passionate, yes, but nothing like the tender way he'd once embraced her. His chin was rough with five-o'clock shadow, and his powerful arms held her tightly against him as they knelt facing each other, bodies pressed together. Even through his black trousers, she could feel how much he wanted her. And she wanted him.

You are my serf, he'd informed her coldly. *Your only reason for living, until you die, is to serve me and give me pleasure*. She'd been enraged. She was no man's slave.

But he wasn't taking her by force, as her lord and master. No—she couldn't kid herself about that. Because no matter how badly he treated her, she still wanted him. She'd never stopped wanting him....

Vladimir's body moved as he took full, hard possession of her lips, stretching her mouth wide with his own, teasing her with his tongue. His hands moved against her back, sliding the thin, blush-colored silk teddy like a whisper against her naked skin. Her breasts felt heavy and taut, her nipples sizzling with awareness.

As he slowly kissed down her neck, her head fell backward. Breathless with need, she closed her eyes. His tongue flicked her collarbone, his hands cupping her breasts through the silk.

"Breanna," he whispered. "You feel so good. Just like I dreamed you would ..."

His breath was warm against her skin as he lowered his head to suckle her through the silk.

She gasped. The sensation of his hot wet mouth against her hard, aching nipple flooded her nerve endings with pleasure. Her fingertips dug into his shoulders as her toes curled beneath her. She pulled him closer.

He sucked gently through the silk, and she felt the fabric move softly, caressing her skin. With agonizing slowness, he pulled the bodice down, and cupped her naked breasts. She felt the roughness of his palm as he rubbed her, then pinched her taut nipples, presenting first one, then the other, to the wet, welcoming warmth of his mouth. Lost in sweet pleasure, she held her breath....

She almost wept in frustration when he suddenly pulled away from her, leaving her bereft. Rising to his feet, he picked her up off the floor as if she weighed nothing at all. He carried her three steps to the bed, then tossed her on the white bedspread.

Eyes wide, Bree leaned back against the pillows and watched as Vladimir stood beside the bed, unbuttoning his shirt. His gaze locked with hers as he undid the cuffs and tossed the shirt to the floor. She had a brief vision of his tanned, muscled chest laced with dark hair before he fell on top of her, pulling her to him for a hard, hungry kiss.

It wasn't gentle or kind. It was primal, filled with fury at his unwilling need. She felt the heavy weight of his muscular body as he pushed her against the mattress. And as he kissed her, the world seemed to spin in a blinding flash of light. She kissed him back fiercely, desperately, forgetting pride and past pain beneath the overwhelming demand of desire.

Without a word, he ripped the pale pink silk teddy off her unresisting body. He looked down at her, now dressed only in the silk G-string panties he'd given her.

"I wanted you to learn your place." His voice was low, almost choked. Reaching out, he stroked her bare breasts in wonder, even as his other hand stroked up and down the length of her nearly naked body. "Instead you teach me mine." His dark blue eyes lifted to hers. "Why do you not touch me? Why do you hold back?"

She remembered her bravado at the poker table, the way she'd bragged about her skills in bed. Her cheeks flooded with heat. "I want to," she whispered. "I don't know how."

"You—don't know how?" he said in disbelief.

“I ...” She swallowed. “I might have implied more than my skills actually deserve. At the poker table ...”

“I don’t give a damn about the game.” He gripped her hand. “Just touch me. If you want to please me, touch me. If you want to punish me,” he groaned, guiding her palm to stroke slowly down his chest to his belly, “touch me.”

Vladimir truly had no idea that she was a virgin. Her fingers shook as she let him guide her, stroking his hard muscles, his hot, bare skin. She’d told him, but he hadn’t believed her.

Suddenly, she didn’t want him to know. Because how would he react if he learned the pathetic truth—that even after he’d abandoned her, she’d never wanted another man to touch her? Would his eyes fill with scorn—or pity?

She shuddered. He must never realize how much of a fool she’d been, or how thoroughly he’d destroyed her ten years ago.

She had to fake it.

Pretend to be the experienced woman he believed her to be.

So how would a sexually adventurous woman behave?

Trembling, Bree reached for his shoulders. Tossing her head with bravado, she rolled him beneath her on the bed. He did not resist, just looked up at her with smoldering eyes dark with lust. Trying to seem as if she was comfortable straddling him, with her breasts naked for a man for the first time, and wearing nothing but the tiny silk G-string, she gazed down at him. He did have an incredible body ... and as long as she didn’t look directly into his deep blue eyes, those eyes that always saw straight through her ...

With an intake of breath, she slowly stroked down his bare chest to the waistband of his black trousers. Shaking with nerves, trying to act confident, she lowered her head.

And she kissed him.

Her lips were tentative, scared. Until she felt his mouth, hot and hard against hers, sliding like liquid silk as he kissed her back. He deepened the embrace, entwining her tongue with his. He tasted like sweet wine and spice and everything forbidden, everything she’d ever denied herself. His lips were soft and hard at once, like satin with steel. He let her set the rhythm and pace, let her lead.

And she forgot her fear. Her hands explored the warm, smooth skin of his hard chest, the edges and curves of his muscles. She stroked his flat nipples and the rough, bristly hair that stretched down his taut torso like an arrow. She heard his ragged intake of breath, and when she glanced up and saw his mesmerized expression, her confidence leaped. It was working! Growing bolder, she ran her fingertips beneath the edge of his waistband, swaying her splayed body against the thick hardness between his legs.

She’d meant it as an exploration. He took it as a taunt. With a growl, he pushed her back against the bed. Pulling off his pants and boxers, he kicked them to the floor.

She gasped when she saw him naked for the first time. He was huge. She couldn’t look away. But as he pulled her back into his arms, crushing her breasts against his chest as he took possession of her mouth with a hard, hungry kiss, she forgot that fear, too.

He kissed slowly down her body, moving from her neck to the valley between her breasts to the flat plain of her belly. His hot breath enflamed her skin. Pushing her legs apart with his hands, he nuzzled her tender, untouched thighs. He kissed the edges of her G-string panties, and she felt the brief flicker of his tongue through silk.

She gasped. Need pounded through her, making her body shake as she felt his mouth move between her legs, gently suckling secret places there. She felt the heat and dampness of his tongue, teasing her on the edge of the fabric, and her back arched against the mattress. With a little cry, she stretched out her arms to grip the sheets, feeling as if she might fly off the bed and into the sky.

His fingers stroked the smooth silk, and she heard the rasp of her own frantic breathing. With tantalizing slowness, he reached beneath the fabric, stroking her wet core with a featherlike touch.

He pushed a single thick fingertip an inch inside her, bending his head to suckle the top of her mound through the silk panties, and her back arched higher, her body grew tighter, and her breathing quickened, so much she started to see stars.

She heard the ripping of fabric as he destroyed the wisp of silk and tossed it to the floor.

“Look at me.”

Against her will, she opened her eyes. Holding her gaze, he lowered his head between her naked thighs and fully tasted her with his wide tongue.

She cried out as she felt him tantalize, then lick, then lap her wet core. Her body twisted with the intensity of the pleasure even as her soul was torn by the intimacy of his gaze. Her heart hammered in her throat. Closing her eyes, she turned away so he could not see her tears.

His tongue changed rhythm; now he was using just the tip on her taut, sensitive nub. It was perfect. It was torture. His tongue swirled in light circles, barely touching her. She ached deep inside, wanting to be filled, wanting to have him inside her. Pleasure was building so hard and fast that her body could barely contain it. She felt an agony of need. With a whimper, she tried to pull away, but he held her firmly, not allowing her to escape from his hot, wet tongue.

Pleasure built higher and higher. “Please,” she panted, nearly crying with need. “Please.”

Holding her down, Vladimir thrust two thick fingertips inside her, then three. Still lapping her, he stretched her wide, his free hand pushing her back against the bed, while his tongue tormented her wet, slick core. And suddenly, she fell off a cliff. Her body exploded. She cried out as waves of ecstasy crashed around her, and she flew.

Quickly sheathing himself in a condom from the bedstand, he positioned himself between her legs. With a single rough thrust, he shoved himself all the way inside her. Gripping his shoulders, Bree cried out as sudden pain tore through her pleasure.

When Vladimir felt the barrier he hadn’t expected, he froze, looking down at her in shock.

“You were—a virgin?” he breathed.

Bree’s eyes squeezed shut, her beautiful face full of anguish as she turned it away, as if she didn’t want him to see. He didn’t move, unable to fathom the evidence he’d felt with his own body. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Trembling beneath him, she slowly opened her eyes again—limpid hazel eyes that glimmered like an autumn lake dark with rain. “I did,” she whispered. She took a ragged breath. “You didn’t believe me.”

Vladimir stared at her beautiful face. Around him, the whole world suddenly seemed to shake and rattle. But the earthquake was in his own heart. He felt something crack inside his soul.

Everything he’d thought about Bree was wrong.

Everything he’d believed her to be—*wrong*.

With a ragged intake of breath, he pulled away. Sitting back on the bed, he choked out, “I don’t understand.”

“Don’t you?” She sat up against the headboard, and her eyes shimmered in the silver-gold moonlight dappling the high-ceilinged bedroom. She licked her lips. “When you didn’t believe me, I started hoping I could keep my virginity a secret. So you wouldn’t ...”

She stopped.

“So I wouldn’t what?”

Her lips trembled as she tried to smile. “Well, it’s pathetic, isn’t it?” She didn’t try to cover her nakedness, as another woman might have done. She just looked straight into his eyes, without artifice, without defenses. “There was no other man for me. Not before you. And not after.”

Staring at her, Vladimir felt as if he’d just been sucker punched.

She’d told him the truth. All these years he’d thought of Bree Dalton as a liar, or worse. But even when she’d looked him in the eyes and told him she was a virgin, he hadn’t believed her.

Who was the one who didn’t recognize the truth when he saw it?

Who was the one who'd forgotten how?

Setting his jaw, he looked at her grimly. "And Alaska?"

She looked down, her eyelashes a dark sweep against her pale skin. "Everything your brother tried to tell you, that Christmas night he burst in on us, was true," she said softly. "I never had the rights to sell Josie's land. I was trying to distract you, so you'd put down earnest money in cash before you realized it, and my sister and I could disappear into a new life."

"To con people somewhere else."

"It was all I knew how to do." Bree lifted her gaze. "It never occurred to me that I could change. Not until ..."

Her voice trailed off.

Yes, Vladimir, I'll marry you. He could almost hear her joyful, choked voice that Christmas night, see the tears in her beautiful eyes as she'd thrown her arms around him and whispered, "I'm not good enough for you, not by half. But I'll spend the rest of my life trying to be."

Now, his hands tightened into fists. "You had plenty of chances to tell me the truth. Instead, you let me find out about your con from Kasimir. You let me shout at him and throw him out of your cabin as a damned liar. You let me leave that night, still not knowing the truth. Until I started getting phone calls the next morning, and discovered from reporters that everything he'd told me about you was true."

"I wanted to tell you. But I was afraid."

"Afraid," he sneered.

"Yes," she cried. "Afraid you wouldn't listen to my side. That you'd abandon me, and I'd be left with no money and no defenses against the wolves circling us. I was afraid," she whispered, "you'd stop loving me."

That was exactly what had happened.

"If that is true, and you were truly intending to change purely because of this *love* for me," he said, his voice dripping scorn, "why didn't you go back to your old life of cheating and lying the instant I left?"

Her eyes widened, then fell. "It wasn't just for you," she muttered. "It was for me, too." She looked up. "And Josie. I wanted to be a good example. I wanted us to live a safe, boring, respectable life." Hugging her knees to her chest, she blinked fast, her eyes suspiciously wet. "But we couldn't."

"You couldn't be respectable?"

"We never felt safe." She licked her lips. "Back in Alaska, some men had threatened to hurt us if I didn't replace money we'd stolen. But my father had already spent it all and more. It was a million dollars, impossible to repay. So for the last ten years, I made sure we stayed off the radar. No job promotions. No college for Josie. Never staying too long anywhere." Bree's lips twisted. "Not much of a life, but at least no legs got broken."

His hands clenched as he remembered the angry looks of the players at the poker game, when she'd told them how she'd cheated them. "Why didn't you tell me about this?"

"I did," she said, bewildered at his reaction. "A few times."

"You told me you had debts," he said tightly. "Everyone has debts. You didn't tell me some men were threatening to break your legs."

She took a deep breath, her face filled with pain.

"Not mine," she whispered. "Josie's."

Vladimir rose to his feet. Still naked, he paced three steps, clenching his hands. His shoulders felt so tense they burned. He was having a physical reaction.

If he'd been wrong about Bree, what else had he been wrong about?

He stopped as he remembered his brother's face, contorted beneath the lights of the Christmas tree. *You're taking her word over mine? You just met this girl two months ago. I've looked up to you my whole life. Why can't you believe I might know more than you—just once?*

But Vladimir, two years older, had always been the leader, the protector. He could still remember six-year-old Kasimir panting as he struggled through the snowy two miles to school. *Wait for me, Volodya! Wait for me!*

But he'd never waited. *If you want to follow me, keep up, Kasimir. Stop being slow.*

Now, as Vladimir remembered that long-lost adoration in his brother's eyes, his heart gave a strange, sickening jump in his chest. Tightening his jaw, he pushed the memory away. He looked at Bree.

"No one will ever threaten you or yours again."

Her lips parted. "What will you do?"

He narrowed his eyes. "They threatened to break a child's legs," he said roughly. "So I'll break every bone in their bodies. First their legs. Then their arms. Then—"

"Who are you?" she cried.

He stopped, surprised at the horror on her face. "What?"

"You're so ruthless." She swallowed. "There is no mercy in you. It's true what they say."

"You expect me to, what—give them a cookie and tuck them into bed?"

"No, but—" she spread her arms helplessly "—break every single bone? You don't just want to win, you want to crush them. Torture them. You've become the kind of man who ... " Her eyes seared his. "Who'd destroy his own brother."

For a moment, Vladimir was speechless. Then he glared at her. "Kasimir made his own choice. When I wouldn't listen to his words about you, he told the story to a reporter. He betrayed me, and when I suggested we split up our partnership, it was his choice to agree—"

"You deliberately cheated your own brother," she interrupted, "out of millions of dollars. And you've spent ten years trying to destroy him. You don't just get revenge, Vladimir. You deal a double dose of pain—breaking not just their legs, but their arms!"

Pacing two steps, he clawed back his dark hair angrily. "What would you have me do, Breanna? Let them threaten you? Pay them off? Let them win? Let my brother take over my company? Not defend myself?"

"But you don't just defend yourself," she said. "You're ruthless. And you revel in it." Her eyes lifted to his. "Has it made you happy, Vladimir? Has destroying other people's lives made yours better?"

He flashed hot, then cold. As they faced each other, naked without touching, in a bedroom deep with shadows and frosted with moonlight, a mixture of emotions raced through his bloodstream that he hadn't felt in a long, long time—emotions he could barely recognize.

Bree took a deep, ragged breath.

"I loved you. I loved the honest, openhearted man you were." Tears glistened like icicles against her pale skin. "The truth is, I love him still."

Vladimir sucked in his breath. *What was she saying?*

"But the man you are now ... " She looked at him. "I hate the man you've become, Vladimir," she whispered. "I hate you now. With all my heart."

He took a single staggering step. He held out his hand and heard his own hoarse, shaking voice. "Bree ..."

"No!" She nearly fell off the bed to avoid his touch. Snatching the crumpled, pink silk robe off the floor, she covered her naked body. "I should never have let you touch me. Ever!"

She fled from the bedroom, racing down the hall.

For an instant, Vladimir stood frozen, paralyzed with shock.

Then, narrowing his eyes, he yanked on a pair of jeans and followed her grimly. Downstairs, he heard the door that led to the pool bang. He followed the sound outside. From the corner of his eye, beneath dark silhouettes of palm trees against the sapphire sky, he saw a pale flash going down the cliff toward the beach.

He followed. Striding around the pool, he pushed through the gate and went down steps chiseled into the rock, leading to the private, white-sand beach. At the bottom, surrounded by the noisy roar of the surf lapping the sand at his feet, he looked right and left.

Where was she?

The large Hawaiian moon glowed like an opalescent pearl across the dark blue velvet ocean, its light sparkling like diamonds.

I loved the honest, openhearted man you were. Her poignant words echoed in his mind. *I hate the man you've become.*

Closing his eyes, he thought of how he'd spent the past ten years, constantly proving to himself how hard and heartless he could be. Betraying others before they could even *think* of turning on him.

Half the world called him ruthless; the other half called him corrupt. Vladimir had worn their hatred like a badge of honor. He'd told himself that it was the fate of every powerful man to be despised. It only proved he'd succeeded. He'd conquered the world. He'd just never thought it would be so ...

Meaningless. Bleakly, he looked out toward the dark waves of the Pacific.

Has it made you happy? Has destroying other people's lives made yours better?

The warm breeze felt cool against his bare skin. He'd loved her so recklessly. The night he'd proposed to her, in front of the crackling fire that dark, cold Christmas, had been the happiest of his life.

Until Kasimir had burst into her cabin and called Vladimir a fool for falling into a con woman's trap. The fighting had woken up her kid sister upstairs, so after tossing his brother out, he'd gone back to his hotel alone. He'd been woken by the ringing of his cell phone—and questions from a *Wall Street Journal* reporter.

Vladimir put a hand to his forehead.

For the past ten years, this woman he'd called a liar and a whore had been quietly working minimum-wage jobs, in a desperate attempt to provide an honest life for her young sister. While he ...

Vladimir exhaled. He'd done exactly what she said. He'd cut all mercy from his heart, to make damn sure no one ever made a fool of him again. He'd closed himself off completely from every human feeling, and he'd tried to eradicate the memory of the woman who'd once broken him.

The moon retreated behind a cloud, and he saw a shadow move. He stumbled down the beach, and as the moon burst out of the darkness, he saw her.

Silvery light frosted the dark silhouette of her body as she rose like Venus from the waves. His heart twisted in his chest.

Breanna.

CHAPTER SIX

BREE stood alone in the surf, staring bleakly out at the moonlit ocean, wishing she was far, far away from Hawaii. She felt the waves against her bare thighs, felt the sand squish beneath her toes. She shivered in the warm night, wishing she was a million miles away.

How could she have given him her virginity?

How could she have let him kiss her, touch her, make her explode with pleasure? *How?*

Allowing Vladimir to make love to her had brought back all the memories of the way she'd once loved him. How could she have allowed herself to be so vulnerable? Why hadn't she been able to protect herself, to keep her heart cold?

Because he'd always known how to get past all her defenses. Always. He hadn't forced her. He hadn't needed to. All he'd done was kiss her, and she'd surrendered, melting into his arms. And she'd been able to hold nothing back. Her feelings had come pouring out of her lips. How she'd loved him.

How she hated him.

When Vladimir had said that no one would ever threaten her or Josie again, she'd been relieved. Grateful, even. Then he'd spoken with such relish about breaking all their bones.

Bree had no love for the men who'd made their lives a misery over the past ten years. But she would have paid back every penny if she could. And seeing Vladimir, the prince she'd loved at eighteen, turned into this ... this *monster*... was unbearable. She'd thought the man she'd loved had betrayed her. But it was far worse than that.

The charming, tender-hearted man she'd loved was dead. Dead and gone forever. And left in his place was nothing but a selfish, coldhearted tycoon.

She missed the man she'd loved. She missed him as she hadn't allowed herself to do for a full ten years. The way he'd held her, respected her, the way he'd made her laugh. He'd still been strong, but he'd looked out for those weaker than himself.

But that man was gone—gone forever.

Tears streamed unchecked down her cheeks as she bowed her head and cried in the moonlight. Even the cool water of the ocean couldn't wash away her grief and regret.

For all these years, she'd pompously lectured Josie that she must be strong as a woman—must never give a man power over her. Bree wiped her eyes.

She was a fraud. She wasn't strong. She never had been.

"Breanna."

She heard his low, deep voice behind her. Whirling around with a gasp, she saw him walking at the edge of the surf, coming toward her.

"Vladimir," she whispered, taking an involuntary step back into the ocean. "You followed me?"

"I couldn't let you go." He walked straight into the waves, never looking away from her. Moonlight traced the strong muscles of his naked chest, and the dark hairline leading to the low-slung waistband of his jeans.

She folded her trembling arms over her wet, flimsy robe. "What more could you possibly do to hurt me?"

His eyes were dark and hot, his voice low. "I don't want to hurt you. Not anymore. Never again."

"Then what do you want?" Then suddenly, Bree knew, and her body shook all over. Backing away, she held up her hand. "Don't—don't come any closer!"

But he didn't stop. He waded nearer, until the water rose higher than his thighs, to his lean, sexy hips, where the wet jeans clung.

Vladimir's gaze fell to her body. Looking down, she realized her robe was completely soaked and sticking to her skin. Even in the moonlight, the color of her nipples was visible through the translucent, diaphanous pink silk.

They stood inches apart, waist-deep in the ocean. Their eyes locked. A current of electricity flashed through her.

"I won't be your possession, Vladimir," she whispered. "I won't be your slave."

His lips curved. "How could a woman like you," he said, "ever be any man's slave?"

A large wave pushed her forward, and the palm she'd held out against him fell upon the hot, bare skin of his solid chest. Without moving her hand, Bree looked up at him. Her heart was beating wildly.

"But you're mine." His dark eyes gleamed as, grabbing her wrists, he pulled her tightly against his body. Twining his hands through her wet hair, he cupped her face and tilted her mouth upwards. "You've always been mine."

"I'm not—"

"Your own body proved it. You belong to me, Breanna. Admit it."

She shook her head wildly. "I despise you."

"Perhaps I deserve your hatred." His words were low, barely audible over the surf and the plaintive cry of faraway seagulls. "But you belong to me, just the same. And I'm going to take you."

As the surf thundered against the beach, Vladimir lowered his mouth to hers.

His kiss was searing, passionate. But she realized something had changed. As he held her against his body like a newly discovered treasure, his lips were exploratory, even tender. His kiss was full of yearning and heartbreak—of vulnerability.

It was the kiss she remembered. The exact way Vladimir had kissed her when Bree's world had been reborn.

A choked sob came from the back of her throat. Wrapping her arms around his shoulders, she kissed him back with all the aching passion of lost time. Standing on the edge of the moon-drenched ocean, they clung to each other as the waves tried, but failed, to pull them apart.

Without a word, he lifted her against his naked chest. Their wet bodies dripped water as he carried her out of the ocean, back to the white-sand beach. And as he carried her up the moonlit cliff path that led to the villa, she closed her eyes, clinging to him.

You're mine. You've always been mine. Your own body proved it.

It was true. Even though she hated him, it had always been true.

Bree was his. And whether she wished it or not, she always would be.

Vladimir left a trail of sand and water as he crossed the floor of their bedroom, then gently lowered Bree to her feet beside the bed.

Neither of them spoke. Almost holding his breath, he slowly stroked down her soft arms to her slender waist. He undid the silken tie of her robe. Never taking his eyes from hers, he peeled the wet, translucent silk off her shoulders and dropped it to the floor.

She now stood before him naked and beautiful, her eyes luminous in the moonlight. Looking at her, this sensual angel, Vladimir trembled, racked with desires both sacred and profane.

He'd taken her virginity. He couldn't undo that.

But he could change her memory of it.

Pulling her naked body into his arms, against his bare chest, he cupped the back of her head, tangling his hands in her long wet hair, and lowered his mouth to hers.

This time, without so much anger and prejudice in his heart, he finally felt her inexperience, the way she held her breath as she hesitated, her lips shy, then tried to follow his lead. He noticed everything he hadn't wanted to see.

This time, he did not plunder. He kissed her softly. Slowly. His lips suggested, rather than forced; they taught, rather than demanded. He let her set the pace. He felt her small body tremble in his arms, and then, with a deep sigh from the back of her throat, she relaxed. Her arms reached around his neck, and he felt her mouth part for him, offering freely what he'd earlier taken like a brute.

As Vladimir held her naked, soft form, still wet from the ocean, waves of desire pummeled his own body with need. But he controlled himself. He would not take her roughly. This time, he would give her the perfect pleasure she deserved. The night he'd wanted to give her long ago ...

Standing beside the four-poster bed, he kissed her for a long time, holding her tight. The two of them swayed in the shadows of the bedroom. Her soft breasts felt like silk, brushing against his bare chest. His ran his hands over the smooth, warm skin of her back, beneath her wet hair.

Their kiss deepened. He did not force it, and neither did she. It just happened, like magic, as the hunger grew like fire between them. He felt the tip of her tongue brush his, and his whole body suddenly felt electric. He could almost see colors in bursts of light behind his closed eyes, like an illumination in the darkness. She was his guiding light and North Star. His one true point.

He held on to her as if, by kissing her, he could go back in time and be the openhearted young man he'd once been. The fearless one ...

Bree's hands moved slowly down the sides of his body, pausing at the recent scars. She drew back to look at his skin. "The racing accident did this?"

He didn't trust himself to speak, so he gave a single unsteady nod.

Her fingers traced the other scars she saw. "And this?"

"Boxing."

"And this?"

"Skydiving."

"So reckless," she sighed. "Don't you know you could die?"

"We're all going to die," he said roughly. "I was trying to feel alive."

Her fingertips explored, accepted fully. As she touched his scars, he held his breath, feeling his soul laid bare.

"Still sorry the car accident didn't kill me?" he said in a low voice.

She stopped at the waistband of his jeans and looked up at him with troubled eyes. For a moment, she didn't answer. Then she shook her head, moving her hand over his heart.

"No," she whispered. "Because I think the man I loved is still inside you."

He grabbed her wrist. "He's dead and gone."

She raised her eyes.

"Are you sure?" she said softly.

The look in her hazel eyes made Vladimir's heart twist in his chest. It was as if she knew exactly who he was, scars and all. As if she saw right through him. Straight to his broken soul.

Turning away without a word, he unzipped the fly of his jeans. He wrestled the wet denim to the floor. Grabbing her wrists, he pulled her to the bed, with her naked body on top of his. The feeling of having her like this—Breanna, the woman he'd hated for ten years, the first and last woman he'd let himself love—left him dizzy.

"I'm not that man," he said aloud, to both of them.

Pulling her wrists from his grip, she put her hands on either side of his face.

"Let me see," she whispered. Lowering her head, she kissed him.

As her sweet mouth moved against his lips, the weight of her naked body pressed against him, and it felt like heaven. Her hands moved slowly across his skin, down his arms, to his hips. Lowering her head, she followed the same path, kissing down his chest to his flat belly.

When he felt the heat of her breath against his thighs, he squeezed his eyes shut, suddenly afraid to move. She paused. Then, tentatively, she reached out her hand and stroked him, exploring the length of his shaft. He gasped softly. Then he felt her weight move on the bed, and suddenly her lips and breath were on him. He felt her mouth against him, her tongue stroke his shaft to the tip.

He gasped again.

She moved slowly, and he suddenly realized this was new to her; she'd never explored any man so intimately before. The thought of this—that she'd waited all this time for him, only for him—was

too much for him to endure. He felt her soft warm mouth enfold him, and he sucked in his breath. One more flicker of her tongue—

Sitting up, he grabbed her, rolling her over. Lying on top of her, he looked straight into her eyes and breathed hoarsely, “No, Breanna. No.”

Putting his hand on her cheek, he lowered his head to hers. As he kissed her lips, his hands stroked her satin-soft skin, cupping her breasts. Moving down her body, he kissed first one breast, then the other, with hot need, suckling her until she gasped. His fingertips caressed down her belly. When he reached the mound between her legs, he stopped. His body was shaking, screaming for him to push inside her.

But he did not. He moved abruptly to the bottom of the bed. Taking one of her feet in his hands, he slowly kissed it, suckling her toes, tasting salt from the Pacific on her sweet, warm skin. He felt her tremble as he kissed the hollow of her foot, then moved up her leg to her calf, and the tender spot behind her knee. When he reached her thighs, he pressed them apart, spreading her.

He risked a glance upward. Her face was rapt, her eyes tightly closed. He heard the rasp of her breath and felt the tremble of her legs as she nervously tried to close them. Smiling to himself—he could hardly wait to give her this pleasure—he held her legs splayed and kissed slowly up the soft skin of her thighs. He moved higher and higher, teasing her with his breath, until he finally spread her wide. Lowering his head, he took a long, deep taste.

He had the satisfaction of hearing her cry out as her body shook with need. Slowly, deliberately, he moved his tongue, widening it to lap at her, then pointing the tip to penetrate a half inch inside her. He felt her body get tighter and tighter, saw her back start to arch off the mattress, as before. But this time, he wanted to give her more.

Flicking his tongue against her swollen nub, he pushed a thick knuckle of his folded finger just barely inside her. She felt wet, so wet for him. One of her hands rested on his head, clutching his hair, no longer trying to pull him away, embarrassment and fear forgotten beneath the waves of pleasure. Her other hand gripped the tousled white sheets of the bed. Her body grew tense and tenser beneath him, until she started to lift off the mattress, as if gravity itself were losing power over her. She held her breath, and then with a loud cry, she exploded. He felt her body contract hard around his knuckle.

Sheathing himself in another condom—except this time, his hands shook so badly he nearly dropped it—he positioned himself as she was still gasping in kittenish cries of pleasure. He wanted to plunge himself inside her.

But he did not.

Even now, he forced himself to stay in control. He entered her body inch by inch, stretching her wide to fully accept him, doing it slowly, so that she could feel him inside her, and he could feel every inch of her. Her eyes opened with wonder, locking with his own. They never looked away as he slowly filled her, so slowly that the exquisite pleasure almost felt like pain. He finally pushed himself inside her, all the way to the hilt.

And he forgot to breathe. She felt so good. This was ecstasy he'd never felt before. *Faster*, his body screamed. *Harder, faster, deeper, now!*

But with a will of iron, he gritted his teeth and ignored his body's demand. He forced himself to go slow for her, in a way he'd never done before for any woman. He wanted this to be what she would remember from her first night of making love. Not the ruthless, rough, crude way of before.

Gripping her hips to steady his pace, he started to slowly ride her. Her hands held his backside, pulling him more tightly inside her, deeper, and deeper still.

He felt her body tighten again, and as he lowered his head to suckle her breasts—first one, then the other—his hardened body moved in a circular motion against hers as he thrust inside her.

Closing her eyes, she clutched his shoulders, digging her nails into his flesh. Vladimir's heart was pounding in his throat with the need to explode inside her, but he forced himself to relax, to

wait. He just needed to see her face light up, to hear her gasp. He just needed to feel her tighten around him one more time....

He pounded inside her, harder and deeper, and her hips lifted to meet the force of his thrust. Lowering his head once more, he kissed her. As their lips met, he heard her suck in her breath, felt her body tighten....

And then she screamed, even louder than she had before. In that same instant, he finally let himself go. It felt so good.... So good ...

Stars exploded behind his eyes, and his own ecstatic shout rang in his ears. Their joined cries of pleasure echoed in the quiet moonlit night, louder than the distant roar of the sea.

Afterwards, they collapsed into each other's arms. Exhausted, he held her close, kissing her temple, whispering her name like a prayer. "Breanna ..."

Vladimir woke abruptly when he heard his cell phone ringing. Blinking in surprise, he saw gray dawn breaking over the clouds. He'd slept all night in Bree's arms.

He looked down. She was still sleeping, cradled naked against his chest.

He'd lowered his guard and slept with a woman in his arms—something he'd never been able to do with anyone but her. The tension in his shoulders was gone. His head didn't hurt. His heartbeat was soft and slow. It was the best sleep he'd had since the accident.

Was this what peace felt like?

His phone buzzed again. Getting up quietly from bed, he picked it up from the nightstand and left the bedroom. Closing the door silently behind him, not wanting to wake her, he put the phone to his ear. "Yes?"

"Your Highness." It was John Anderson, his chief of operations. "The Arctic Oil merger is now urgent. Your brother just had a huge oil find in Alaska. On the land he bought last spring from that Spaniard, Eduardo Cruz."

"Wait," Vladimir growled. His hands were shaking as he went down the hall to his office. So much for peace. He could feel his heartbeat thrumming in his neck, hear his own blood rushing in his ears. His brother had that effect on him. He closed the office door. "Go."

"Sir, if the find is as substantial as it seems, oil might soon flood the market, causing the price to drop...."

Vladimir paced as he listened, clawing back his hair. Usually business calmed him, because he relished a fight. But not when the news involved his brother.

Volodya, Volodya, please wait for me! Closing his eyes, Vladimir could still see his baby brother's chubby face as he'd toddled after him through the snow those long-ago, hungry winters. Sometimes supplies at the homestead grew lean, and Vladimir had gone out with their father to hunt rabbits. *I want to hunt, too.* Once, Kasimir had idolized his big brother. Now, he enjoyed taunting and hurting Vladimir any chance he could get. Kasimir would probably be the death of him.

As his COO droned on, Vladimir barely listened. He felt weary. For ten years now, he'd fought this fight. There was no longer any joy in it. He'd taken up hobbies like car racing, risking death for the sake of cutting a few seconds off his time. He'd taken women, in endless, meaningless one-night stands. He'd been starving to feel something. Anything. But lately, even the thrill of cheating death had brought only a tiny blip.

There were no new worlds to conquer. He'd been going through the motions for a long time. He felt nothing.

Not until last night.

Not until Breanna returned to him.

He exhaled. *Breanna.*

She made him *feel*, after years of deadness. She'd brought pleasure. Yearning. Anger. Guilt. Desire. All wrapped up in a chaotic ball. He felt as if he'd just woken out of a coma, after years of dull gray sleep.

Perhaps he was incapable of love, with a soul twisted and gnarled like a tree split by lightning. He'd told her the truth: he'd never be the man he'd once been—naive and trusting enough to give away the shirt off his back. Not even for a woman like her.

Barely hearing his COO's voice, Vladimir looked through the window of his villa's home office. The bright Hawaiian dawn was burning through the low-swept morning clouds still kissing the green earth. The sky was turning blue, as blue as the sparkling ocean below.

He had the sudden memory of Breanna rising from the waves in the moonlight last night, her short silk robe stuck to her like a second skin as rivulets of water streamed down her breasts to her thighs. Vladimir shuddered, turning instantly hard. Instead of satiating him, making love to her had only increased his hunger.

“... So what should we do, Your Highness?” his COO finished anxiously.

Vladimir blinked, realizing he hadn't been listening to the man for the past ten minutes. But he suddenly felt bored by business matters—completely bored. Even though it involved his brother. “What is your opinion?”

“We'll have someone at our Alaska site infiltrate your brother's mining operation to see if the data is accurate. If it is, we can try to influence the political process to delay their building. We could even consider some kind of sabotage at the mine. Although of course it would in no way be traceable back to you, sir...”

You're ruthless. And you revel in it. The realization of how low he'd sunk caused Vladimir to flinch. “No.”

“But, Your Highness ...”

“I said no.” Clawing back his hair, he paced across his office with his phone at his ear, prowling in circles around his desk.

“So what are your orders, Your Highness? How shall we make sure your brother does not succeed?”

Vladimir abruptly stopped. He'd been wrong about Breanna.

Could he have similarly been wrong about Kasimir, overreacting to his brother's betrayal?

It was an accident. His brother's voice had been muffled, humble, on the phone the next day from St. Petersburg. *When you wouldn't believe me, I was angry and drunk at the airport bar. I didn't realize the man sitting next to me was a reporter for the Anchorage Herald. Forgive me, Volodya.*

Vladimir's hands tightened into fists. But he hadn't accepted the apology. He'd been angry, humiliated, haunted. And he feared his stupidity might jeopardize the Siberian mining rights that were about to come through, rights that could make or break the fledgling company. “If you can't trust my leadership, we should end this partnership.”

“Leadership? I thought we were supposed to be equals,” his brother had retorted. When Vladimir maintained a frosty silence, Kasimir had said harshly, “Fine. I'll keep the rights in Africa and South America. And you can go to hell.”

Vladimir had been angry enough to let his brother go without telling him about the Siberian rights worth potentially half a billion dollars. He'd effectively cheated Kasimir out of his half.

Perhaps ... He took a deep breath. Perhaps Kasimir had some cause to seek revenge against him.

“You will do nothing.” Now, Vladimir stared out the window toward the palm trees and blue sky. “My brother's operation in Alaska does not affect us. Leave him alone. May the best company win.”

“But, sir!”

“Xendzov Mining can win in a fair fight.”

“Of course we can!” the man replied indignantly. He continued in a bewildered voice, “It's just that we've never tried.”

“No more dirty tricks,” Vladimir said harshly.

“It will be harder—”

“Deal with it.”

The man cleared his throat. “You were expected in St. Petersburg today for the signing of the Arctic Oil merger. How long do you wish us to delay ...?”

Vladimir gritted his teeth. “I will be at the office tomorrow.”

“Good.” He audibly exhaled. “With ten billion dollars on the line, we don’t want anything to—”

“Tomorrow.” Vladimir hung up. Tossing his phone on his desk, he left the study, with its computers and piles of paperwork. Walking outside to the courtyard, he stopped by the pool. Closing his eyes, he turned his face toward the bright morning sun. He felt the warmth of the golden light, and took a breath of the exotic, flower-scented air.

I think the man I love is still inside you.

He’s dead and gone.

Are you sure?

Slowly, Vladimir opened his eyes. He looked up at the twenty-million-dollar mansion that he’d bought as a refuge, but which had felt like a prison.

Bree Dalton had brought it to life. As she’d done to him.

But what right did he have to keep her prisoner?

He’d told himself she deserved it. She was the one who’d betrayed him ten years ago, then foolishly wagered her body in a card game. Let her finally face the consequences of her actions.

He paced around the edge of the pool, then stopped, clawing back his hair. But she’d offered her body in desperation. He’d abandoned her without a penny in Alaska, with men threatening them for money. And yet, even under that pressure, Bree had managed to come through the fire with a soul as pure as steel.

He still wanted to find those men and break their legs, their arms. Every bone in their bodies. But there was something he wanted even more.

He wanted Breanna.

His long-dormant conscience stirred, telling him he had no right to keep her. If he truly believed that she’d never meant to betray him, that she’d wagered herself only to protect her little sister, then he should let her go. If he kept her as his slave, it would make him no better than the criminals who’d imprisoned her with debts. He was selfish, but not a monster.

Wasn’t he?

Pushing the thought away, he pulled out his cell phone and made a few calls. One to an investigator. The other to his secretary, to arrange a Russian visa. Then he picked a wild orchid from the garden and went back inside the house. He’d given his household staff the day off, after Mrs. Kalani’s reaction to his treatment of Bree yesterday. So the enormous kitchen was quiet as he made her a breakfast tray. Putting the orchid in a vase, he walked up the stairs to their bedroom.

Breanna was still drowsing in bed. But as he pushed open the door, she sat up, tucking the sheet modestly over her naked breasts.

“Good morning,” she said shyly.

Vladimir went to the bed. She looked so innocent and fresh and pretty, the epitome of everything good. He put the breakfast tray into her lap. “I thought you might be hungry.”

“I am.” Her cheeks blushed a soft pink as she looked down at the tray, with its toast and fresh fruit and fragrant flower. “Thank you.” Looking up, she gave him a sudden wicked smile. “Last night left me really, really hungry.”

The bright, teasing look on her face took his breath away. He said abruptly, “I have to go to St. Petersburg today.”

Her face fell. “Oh.” Looking away, she said stiffly, “Well. Good. I’ll be glad to be free of you.”

“Too bad.” Turning her face roughly, he cupped her cheek. “You’re coming with me.”

Her eyes lit up. Then she scowled, glaring at him. “Because I’m your property and slave, right? Because you get to boss me around and take me wherever you want, right?”

He kissed her bare shoulder. “You got it.”

She shivered as his lips touched her. “You are such a jerk—”

Leaning over the tray, he kissed her lips, long and thoroughly, just to remind her who was in charge. Her lips parted so sweetly, it took all his strength to stop. He needed to order his private jet to leave within the hour. He had no time to make love to her.

But as he drew away, he saw that the white cotton sheet had fallen from her heedless hands, revealing the glory of her naked, trembling breasts. Against his will, he leaned forward to kiss her again, and they both jumped as they heard the breakfast tray crash to the floor.

Bree gave an impish laugh. “Maybe you should consider paper plates. I know you’re rich and all, but honestly, I can’t clean up all your broken china.”

With a growl, Vladimir pushed her back against the bed.

“Don’t worry. You’ll never clean for me again,” he whispered. “From now on ... there’s only one thing I want you to do for me.”

Forcing his conscience to be silent, he lowered his mouth to hers. As he tasted the sweetness of her lips, he knew he wouldn’t give her up. She was his. He’d won her—she belonged to him, for as long as he desired her. If that meant he was a monster, so be it.

I think the man I love is still inside you.

He’s dead and gone.

Are you sure?

As Vladimir felt her naked body move like silk beneath him, she gave a trembling sigh. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down to heaven.

Yes. He was sure.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Russia.

AS A child, Bree had traveled down the rocky, forest-covered Alaskan coast with her father, seeking gullible tourists off cruise ships for poker games. Her favorite village had been Sitka, once the capital of Russian America. At twelve, she'd looked across the gray, frozen Bering Sea and dreamed of the distant, ancient, mysterious land of the tsars.

When wooden Orthodox churches were being hacked out of the wilderness in Alaska, St. Petersburg was already a century old, built on the orders of a tsar. She'd dreamed of someday seeing the palatial Russian city, the onion domes of its cathedrals shining with silver and gold.

But Bree never dreamed she'd come here as the cosseted mistress of a prince. For two days now, she'd been living in his three-story palace outside the city, built like a fortress on a hill, overlooking the Gulf of Finland on the Baltic Sea. She'd spent her days shopping in the most exclusive boutiques of the city, accompanied by his bodyguards and his chauffeur.

She spent her nights in Vladimir's bed. He came to her in the middle of the night, waking her, making love to her in darkness, setting her body ablaze from the inside out. He burned her with the fire of their mutual need. Each night, she fell asleep in his arms, satiated with pleasure.

But each day, she woke up in the cold gray winter dawn, bereft and alone.

Vladimir was extremely busy, working on the Arctic Oil merger. Even if he was using her only for sex, she shouldn't take it personally. Right? That was what she'd expected. Wasn't it? She should be grateful for this life he'd given her, one of luxury, pleasure and comfort. Most women would envy her. She should make the best of things.

So she tried.

Left alone all day, she went shopping, as Vladimir had ordered. Four bodyguards took her out in a black limousine with bulletproof glass. Expensive designer shops closed their doors to all other customers so Bree could shop alone, quite alone, with only sycophantic store clerks for company.

Maybe it would have been fun if Vladimir had been with her. Or Josie. Bree missed her sister like a physical ache in her heart. She'd tried multiple times over the past few days to call her, but Josie never answered. Bree tried to squelch her worries. Surely Josie was fine. It was just her own loneliness, playing tricks on her mood, that made Bree anxious.

But after two exhausting days of shopping, shocked at the outrageous prices, she was desperate to find something, anything, else to do. "Buy a wardrobe of winter clothes," Vladimir had said, shoving his credit card into her hand. "And lingerie." Wanting to be done, she'd randomly grabbed two items the clerks were pushing on her—a long, puffy black coat and an expensive lingerie set with a white lace bustier, G-string and garter belt—and practically ran from the store. The bodyguards formed a tunnel to her waiting black limo, and she fled past the annoyed faces of Russian women waiting outside.

But now, on her third day in St. Petersburg, as she sat alone at a very long table in the empty palace, eating an elegant lunch prepared by the Russian-speaking housekeeper, Bree felt a rush of pure relief when her cell phone rang. She snatched it up. "Hello?"

"What are you wearing?"

At the sound of Vladimir's low, sensual voice, her shoulders relaxed. "I thought you might be Josie."

"Sorry to disappoint you."

"I'm glad to hear your voice." Her hand tightened on her phone. "I'm, um, wearing my old flannel pajamas and big bootie slippers from home."

"Sounds sexy. Want to come over?"

"Come where?"

“To my office.”

She blinked. “Why?”

“I have a fifteen-minute break coming up. I thought I’d have you for lunch.”

A shiver of sensual delight went through her at his words. Straightening in her antique chair, she retorted, “Forget it. I’m not going to rush over to your office like some kind of booty-call delivery service. I might be your sex slave, but I do have some standards.”

“I think you’ll change your mind when you hear what I want to do to you....”

She listened to his low growl of a voice describing his intentions in graphic detail, and her hand went limp until the phone fell from her grasp and clattered to the floor. She snatched it up.

“I’ll be right there,” she said breathlessly. Clicking off, she pulled her new lingerie from the designer bag and tugged it on. Covering herself with the black puffy coat, that trailed to her ankles, she replaced her slippers with black stiletto boots and went outside, where a bodyguard held open her limousine door.

Bree’s heart pounded as the chauffeur drove into the heart of St. Petersburg. She barely saw the elegant buildings lining the snowy streets and icy Neva River. All she could think about was what waited for her. *Who* waited for her.

The limo arrived at a sprawling eighteenth-century building. A bodyguard opened her door and said in heavily accented English, “This is office, miss.”

She looked up and down the block. The structure seemed to stretch endlessly along the avenue. “Which one?”

The bodyguard looked at her. “All. Is Xendzov building.”

“All of it?” Bree looked at the classically columned building in shock. It was one thing to theoretically know that Vladimir was rich. It was another to see this enormous building, an entire city block, and know it represented a mere fragment of his worldwide empire.

Swallowing nervously, she went into the foyer and took an elevator to the top floor. Down the hall, through a wall of glass, she saw men in suits packed around a conference table, some of them pounding the tabletop as they argued, while secretaries refilled their coffee cups and took notes.

Vladimir looked devastatingly powerful and ruthless, in a shirt and tie. And clearly, she wasn’t the only woman to think so. She noticed how the secretaries walked a little more slowly and swayed their hips a little more around him. The beauty of Russian women was justly famous. Their skirts were short, their hair long, their stiletto heels high. They clearly knew their feminine power and were willing to sacrifice comfort in order to hold a man’s attention.

Bree’s confidence tumbled. If Vladimir was surrounded by women like this, why on earth had he sent for her? The sexy playfulness of her errand disappeared. What a laugh. It was like dialing out for a hamburger, when he was surrounded by steak!

He would laugh in her face when he got a good look at her in this stupid lingerie. Her cheeks burned and she started to turn around.

Their eyes met through the glass.

Spinning on her heel, Bree practically ran down the hallway. If she could just reach the elevator ...

His hand gripped her upper arm, whirling her to face him. “Where are you going?”

She licked her lips, looking up at this broad-shouldered, powerful man standing in his own building, surrounded by his paid employees. Vladimir had rolled up his shirtsleeves, revealing sleekly muscled forearms laced with dark hair. His tie had been loosened around his thick neck, as if he’d been fighting corporate war all day.

She tried to pull away, but his grip was like iron. “I never should have come here,” she said. “Haven’t you humiliated me enough?”

Vladimir frowned, drawing closer. “What are you ...?” People passed them in the hall, two men in suits and three women in tiny skirts, all looking at them with intense interest. Narrowing his eyes, he growled, “Come with me.”

He pulled her into the nearest private office, closing the door behind them. She wrenched her arm away, blinking fast. Her eyes were stinging with unshed tears as she tossed her head. “You’re out of your mind if you think ...”

She gasped as, without a word, he roughly yanked open her oversized coat. He saw the lingerie, the white lace bustier, G-string panties and garter belt, and drew in a breath. He looked at her darkly.

“And *you* are out of your mind,” he said in a low voice, “if you think I’m going to let you leave.”

He ripped off her long coat, dropping it to the floor. Pushing her against the wall of the private office, he kissed her hard. Bree’s body stiffened as his mouth plundered hers. She felt the soft, demanding steel of his lips against her own. Against her will, a moan came from the back of her throat, and her arms lifted to wrap around his neck.

His hands roamed over her body. He cupped her breasts, then undid her bustier in a single motion, dropping the white lace from her skin. Still kissing her passionately, he pushed her toward the desk, which he cleared with a sweep of his arm, knocking papers and computer topsy-turvy to the floor.

She could not resist. As he pressed her back against the desk, she relished the feeling of his weight. He kissed down her neck to her bare breasts, ravishing her body, and she panted, suddenly breathless with need. Her hands reached beneath his shirt to stroke his taut, hard chest.

Then she heard a noise at the door.

Dazed, Bree looked over and saw a man staring at them from the doorway. He said something in Russian, before Vladimir turned his head. The man’s mouth snapped shut, his face red with the apparent effort of choking back his words. Turning, he left instantly, closing the door behind him.

But the damage was done. The man had seen her draped nearly naked across Vladimir’s desk. Horrified, Bree said angrily, “That man’s got some nerve, bursting into your office without warning!”

“This is his office—” Vladimir leaned back on the desk, tilting his head “—not mine.”

“What?” she squeaked, sitting up.

“My office is on the other side of the building. Would have taken too long.”

He leaned forward to kiss her, but she jerked back, nearly falling off the desk. “Are you crazy? I’m not going to fool around with you in someone else’s office!”

“Why not?” he said lazily. “What does it matter? This building is mine. This office is mine. Just as you ...”

She folded her arms over her naked breasts, glaring at him. “Just as I am?”

“Yes.” Standing up, he tucked a tendril of hair behind her ear and said huskily, “Just as you are.”

A pain went through her chest. His words were playful, but he was speaking a truth she’d been trying to conveniently forget: that Vladimir owned her. She was his property.

Bree’s cheeks flooded with shame as she remembered the expression on the man’s face when he’d seen Vladimir lying on top of her on the desk. He’d looked at her as if she were a prostitute. And glancing down at herself in only a G-string and garter belt, a sex-time delivery service, Bree felt a lump rise in her throat. Leaning down, she picked up the discarded bustier off the floor.

The smug masculine smile dropped from Vladimir’s face. “What are you doing?”

She put on the long black coat, stuffing the bustier into the pocket. “Returning to my prison.”

“*Prison?*” he repeated. “I have given you a palace. I’ve given you everything a woman could possibly desire.”

“Right.” She zipped the puffy coat all the way to her throat. As she turned away, she felt like crying.

Vladimir stopped her at the door. “Why are you so sad?”

The ache in her throat made it impossible to talk. She shook her head, unable to meet his eyes.

“You were—embarrassed?”

“Yes,” she choked out.

“But why?” he demanded. “He is nothing. No one. Why do you care?”

Bree lifted her eyes. “Because I, too, am nothing,” she whispered. “And no one.”

He shook his head in exasperation. “I don’t understand what you’re talking about.”

To you. I am nothing and no one to you. She turned her head. “I don’t expect you to understand.”

“Fine,” he said coldly. “If you don’t want to be here, go home.”

She lifted her gaze hopefully. “Home to my sister?”

“Our home! Together!”

Her shoulders slumped. She stared down at her feet.

“There is no *together* at the palace,” she said in a small voice. “There’s just me. Alone.”

“You know I am dealing with a complex merger, Breanna,” he said tightly. “I have no time to—”

“I know.” Her lips twisted. “I should just be grateful you show up in my bed in the middle of the night, right? Grateful you’re so very, very good to me.”

He ground his teeth, his eyes dark.

“I gave you my credit card. You should have bought out half the city by now. You should be enjoying yourself. You can buy whatever you wish—clothes, furs, shoes. And a ball gown. It is supposed to be fun.”

“*Fun*,” she muttered.

He scowled. “Is it not?”

“Shopping all by myself in a foreign city, as your bodyguards keep other people out of the store, and six different salesgirls try to convince me that a puce-colored burlap sack with ostrich feathers looks good on me ...?” Bree shuddered. “No. It’s not fun.” She indicated the long black coat. “This is the sum total of my purchases.”

He blinked. “The coat?”

“And the lingerie.”

“Damn it, Bree, you aren’t in Hawaii anymore. I told you to buy warm clothes.”

“Who cares if I feel warm?” She glared at him. “I’m just your possession. My feelings don’t matter.”

He stared at her, and the air around them suddenly became electrified. “Of course they matter.” He took a single step toward her. “Breanna—”

A knock sounded at the door. An older man poked his head in, an American with wire-rimmed glasses and anxious eyes. “Your Highness. Excuse me.”

“What is it, Anderson?” Vladimir demanded.

The man looked at Bree and then cleared his throat. “We’ve reached an impasse, sir. Svenssen is demanding we retain every member of his company’s staff.”

“So?”

“Arctic Oil has a thousand employees we don’t need. Drillers. Cafeteria workers in Siberia. Accountants and secretaries. Dead weight.”

Dead weight. Bree’s spine snapped straight. He would no doubt consider her and Josie *dead weight*, too, with their ten years of backbreaking, low-paying cleaning jobs. Every month, they’d experienced the painful uncertainty of never knowing if their jobs would last, or if they’d be able to pay their bills. Biting her lip, she glanced up and saw Vladimir watching her. His eyes narrowed.

“Tell Svenssen,” he said slowly, “we’ll find places for all his current employees. At their current pay level or better.”

His employee gaped, aghast. “But, sir! Why?”

“Yes, why?” Bree echoed. She took a deep breath and gave him a trembling smile. “Don’t tell me you’ve actually got a heart.”

His lips abruptly twisted. “To the contrary.” He turned back to Anderson. “I merely want to ensure that we’re well staffed for future expansion.”

“Expansion?” The man visibly exhaled in relief.

Vladimir lifted a dark eyebrow. “That should simplify your negotiations.” Turning to Bree, he took her hand. “I will be unavailable for the rest of the day,” he said softly.

“You will?” she breathed.

“But Prince Vladimir—”

He ignored the man. Pulling Bree from the office, he led her down the hall to the elevator. As he pushed the button, she looked at him, her heart in her throat.

“Where are we going?”

He tilted his head, giving her a boyish grin that took her breath away. “I’m going to show you my beautiful city.”

His voice was casual. So why did she feel as if something had just changed between them, changed forever? She tried not to feel his strong, protective hand over her own, tried not to feel her own heart beating wildly. “But your merger is important. You said—”

“My people will manage. Let them earn their overpriced salaries.”

“But why are you doing this?”

“I’ve realized something.” Vladimir’s eyes were ten shades of blue. “You belong to me.”

She exhaled. “I know,” she said dully. “You already said—”

“You belong to me.” He cupped her cheek. “That means it’s my job.”

“What is?”

He looked intently into her eyes, and then smiled. “To take care of you.”

Vladimir’s mouth fell open as he stared at the beautiful angel who stood on a pedestal before him. Literally.

“Do you like it?” the angel said anxiously. “Do you approve?”

Bree was trying on her fourth designer ball gown, a strapless concoction in pale blue that revealed her elegant bare shoulders, the curve of her breasts and her slender waist above wide skirts of shot silk. She looked like a princess. Ethereal. Magical. Intoxicating.

“I can’t possibly let you buy this,” the enchanted beauty said fretfully. “You won’t let them tell me how much it costs, but I’m sure it’s very expensive.”

Vladimir lifted his hand, signaling to the five saleswomen who were hovering around them in the luxury designer atelier. “We will take it.”

With a happy gasp, the salesgirls descended on Bree with sewing pins and measuring tape, to shape the couture gown perfectly to her body. Bree looked at them in dismay. But it was nothing compared to the sick expression he’d seen on her face when his COO had wanted to fire all the workers he called “dead weight.”

Vladimir had lied. He wasn’t planning an expansion. He’d just been unable to bear the emotions he’d seen on Bree’s face: the anger, the powerlessness, the desperation. It reminded him how she’d spent ten years wasting her talents in minimum-wage jobs, because the man she’d trusted to protect her had left her to face all her enemies alone.

Now, she bit her pink, full lower lip. “I shouldn’t let you do this.”

“It’s already decided.” Rising to his feet, he felt glad once more that he’d decided to take the day off and spend it with her, leaving even the bodyguards behind. He put his hand on her shoulder. “You need a dress. I’m taking you to a very elegant ball for New Year’s Eve.”

Bree’s dark-fringed hazel eyes went wide. “You are?”

“You will be,” he said huskily, “the most beautiful woman there.”

“I—I will?”

Her cheeks blushed in girlish confusion. Her charming innocence, at such odds with the wickedly seductive vixen she'd been when she'd shown up at his office building in lingerie hours before, made Vladimir want to kiss her.

So leaning forward, he did.

Her lips felt hot and velvety-soft. Her mouth parted for him, and he deepened the kiss. With a gasp, Bree started to wrap her arms around him.

Then she winced, pulling away. Rubbing her arm, she looked down at her skin. She'd been pricked by the needle of the salesgirl attempting to pin the waist of Bree's bodice.

Vladimir saw a small red dot of blood on Bree's skin, and was blinded by instant, brutal rage. He turned on the hapless girl and spoke harsh words in Russian.

The salesgirl choked back a sob and answered him with a flurry of begging and excuses. He stared at her, implacable as stone.

The salesgirl fell to her knees in front of Bree, holding the hem of the blue silk ball gown as she gazed up with imploring eyes.

Bree looked up at him uneasily. "What's she saying?"

"She's begging for mercy," Vladimir said coldly. "She's saying she's the sole support of an aging mother and two-year-old son, and she's begging you to intervene with me, so I don't have her fired."

"You wouldn't do that!"

"I have just told her I will."

"What?" Bree gasped, staring at him. "No!"

"*She hurt you,*" he said tightly.

"It wasn't her fault!" Bree tugged on the young woman's arms, forcing her to rise. "I'm the one who moved. And you're the one who kissed me! She never meant to stick me with her needle!"

"What does her intention matter? The pain for you was the same."

Bree was staring at him as if he were crazy. "Of course it matters! Why would I punish her for something that she didn't even mean to do? It was an accident!"

It was an accident. The memory of his brother's miserable, humbled voice on the phone ten years ago floated unbidden through Vladimir's mind. *Forgive me, Volodya. I'm sorry.*

"Don't have her fired. Don't!"

Bree's beautiful face came into focus. "Josie and I have been fired like this before." Her eyes were pleading as she clutched his arm. "You don't know what it's like, to always know that your boss or a single customer can just snap his fingers and take away your livelihood and your pride and your ability to feed your family." She swallowed, her heart-shaped face stricken. "Please don't do this."

Vladimir's lips parted. He didn't even realize he'd agreed to her request until he saw Bree's beautiful face light up with happiness. He dimly heard the grateful sobs of the Russian girl, but as Bree threw her arms around him, he felt only her. Saw only her.

"Thank you," she whispered. She drew back, tears sparkling in her eyes. "And thank you for that huge tip you gave her as an apology. I never expected that." A smile lifted Bree's trembling lips. "I'm starting to think you might have a heart, after all."

Huge tip? Looking down, Vladimir saw that his wallet was indeed open in his hand, and was now considerably lighter. The salesgirl was holding a wad of rubles, weeping with joy as she shared the unexpected largesse with the others.

"It was kind of you, to care for her."

His cheeks burned as he turned back to Bree. "I don't give a damn about her."

"But—"

He cut in. "I did it for you."

She took a deep breath.

"That's why I know you have a heart," she whispered.

And Vladimir knew she was right. Because in this moment, his heart was beating erratically, misfiring, racing.

Taking her hand in his own, he pulled her down from the pedestal. "I just want you to be happy," he said roughly. He didn't know how to manage this reckless, restless yearning he felt every time he looked into her beautiful face, every time he touched her. He looked down at her hand, nestled so trustingly in his. "I want to give you a gift."

"You already did."

"Tipping a salesgirl doesn't count."

She looked down at the exquisite blue ball gown. "You're buying me this dress."

"I want to do something for you," he growled. "Something you actually care about. Anything."

Her eyes went wide with dawning, desperate hope.

"Set me free," she choked out.

Let Bree go? He couldn't. *Wouldn't*. After ten years, he'd found her again. What were the chances of them walking into the same poker game in Hawaii? Surely fate had placed her there for a reason?

She'd brought sunlight and warmth into his life. But if he let her go, she might leave. He couldn't take that risk. Not now. She meant too much.

Folding his arms, he scowled. "You lost fair and square."

"But this is what I want, more than anything—"

"No, Breanna." He set his jaw. "Something else."

Crushing disappointment filled her eyes. She looked down. "My birthday is in a few days. Let me fly back to the States and spend it with my sister. I'm worried about her..."

"Josie is fine. My men left her in Seattle, as she requested. She has money. She is fine."

"So why haven't I been able to reach her phone?" She swallowed. "I've always taken care of her..."

"She's a grown woman," he said, irritated. "And you coddle her like a child."

Her eyes flashed. "Coddle!"

"Yes, *coddle*. She will never grow up until you allow her to make her own choices, and live with the consequences!"

Bree stiffened. "Like you did, you mean—cheating your brother out of the company?"

He glared at her. "He chose to leave, rather than accept my leadership. It made him strong. Strong enough to be my rival!"

"Your enemy, you mean!"

Controlling himself, Vladimir exhaled. "Breanna, I don't want to fight."

She licked her lips, then shook her head. "I don't, either. But I have a reason to protect Josie. I told you, there are men who want to hurt us..."

With a harsh word and a clap of his hands, Vladimir scattered the salesgirls, leaving him alone with Bree in the dressing room. Coming closer, he put his hands on her shoulders and said in a low voice, "Those men won't be bothering you."

She blinked. "They won't?"

"My people tracked them down. One of the men was already dead, unfortunately." Vladimir gave a grim smile. "But the other two will never bother you or Josie again."

Her eyes were huge. "What did you do?" she whispered. "Tell me you didn't ... break anything."

Vladimir narrowed his eyes. "I wanted to. But I respected your request. I paid them off. Also, my investigator gathered enough evidence to have them both thrown in prison for the rest of their lives. If they ever cross your path again, even accidentally, that information will go to the local police. And they will die in jail." He looked at her blank face, suddenly uncertain. "Is that satisfactory?"

"Satisfactory?" She took a deep breath, then with a sob, threw her arms around him. "Thank you," she whispered. "We're free!"

He looked down at her, wiping the tears off her cheek gently with his thumb. “I’ll never let anyone hurt you or your sister, Breanna. Ever again.”

Her lower lip wobbled. “Thank you.”

Seeing her reaction, he wanted to do more. He heard himself say, “And I’ll have my men look around Seattle. See if they can track Josie down.”

“Okay,” she sniffled.

“Do you have any idea where she might be?”

She shook her head. “We used to say that when we got back to the Mainland, if we had money, we’d start our own bed-and-breakfast, or a small hotel.” Her cheeks flushed. “But the truth is, that’s my dream, not hers. She wants to go to college.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll find her.” Pulling his phone out of his pocket, he turned away. He was stopped by Bree’s small voice.

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