

RAZOR'S EDGE

AMERICAN YAKUZA III

A woman's face in profile, wearing a black hood that covers her eyes and forehead. She has bright red lips. The background is dark with a subtle light flare behind the hood.

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Chapter Two

Three days earlier

The unmistakable aroma of antiseptic and cleaning solution bit Luce's nostrils, waking her. Someone from housekeeping swished the mop around the floor. Without thinking, she pulled out her handkerchief and covered her nose, trying not to be too offensive to the woman who was just doing her job.

Luce hated hospitals. They only brought death, as far as she was concerned. The smells, the lights, and the nurses clad in scrubs all reminded her of her time spent with her dying grandfather. She'd kept a bedside vigil as he struggled to battle the aggressive cancer that finally claimed his life. He handled his pain as he handled all loss, especially that of his wife—taken in the prime of her life. Then the loss of his only daughter, Luce's mother. He had faced his impending death with dignity and honor, never complaining about the disease that had a stranglehold on his last breaths. She'd never forget the last sound as the nurse had pushed her out of his room. The flat-line beep had torn through her like a sharp tanto blade, forever scoring her soul.

Luce shaded her eyes as the flickering fluorescent lights played on her last nerve, just as they did every time they were flicked on. Nurses, unannounced, rushed in to take Brooke's vitals, and housekeeping dashed around the room to clean, avoiding Luce's penetrating gaze. The mop swerved under the bed, just missing Luce's loafers. She raised her feet as the swirling machine darted to where she'd just been taking up real estate, and then it was gone again, leaving behind the skid marks of acrid cleaning solution. They'd done this dance every day for the past week, and it always ended the same way. Backing out, the woman pulled the bucket backward, slung the curtain closed, and Luce ordered, "Lights."

The buzzing ended immediately, and Luce could go back to her vigil, this time watching Brooke breathe and knowing she would get out of the death chamber. Luce planted her chin back on the bed and watched Brooke sleep. Every once in a while she mumbled or moaned in pain, and like a working dog, Luce alerted, stood, and ran her fingers over Brooke's brow, trying to offer some comfort. Most times Brooke turned her head away from Luce's touch, but the few times she'd awoken, she offered Luce a meager smile, her eyes barely registering Luce's presence. Then she mumbled an apology as she faded back into her drug-induced fog.

It pained Luce to see Brooke so damaged, so broken. The stab wound to her side had almost been fatal. In the mix of panic and urgency that day, Luce had shattered every speed record and blown through most red lights as she raced to get her lover to the hospital. She'd watched Brooke, motionless in the backseat, with one eye and kept the other riveted on traffic. The only other thing she focused on was the revenge she would exact on Frank for nearly taking Brooke's life. She'd promised her grandfather only weeks earlier as he lay dying in this very hospital that Frank would pay. Now she was doubly sure it would be a slow, painful death, Yakuza style.

Luce rolled her head to the side so she could rest and still watch Brooke. She'd been there for hours already. A bedside watch was a small price to pay compared to what could have happened. Luce laced her fingers between Brooke's and brought the fragile digits to her lips, kissing each one. She'd survived the vicious attack at the hands of Frank, her grandfather's own Benedict Arnold. The second-in-command had defected to the Russians and was hell-bent on destroying Luce, her business, and everything she loved.

She couldn't even imagine her world without her lover, yet she'd almost had to. Her heart had hardened when she lost her grandfather. The loss of Tamiko had pushed her to the edge. But the attack on Brooke almost broke her. When she wasn't focused on Brooke, her thoughts of revenge comforted her most. She was relieved when Colby Water had informed her that the charges against her boss, Deputy Chapel, would stick. Luce hated the way the story had played out, but dirty DOJ officials were worse than crime bosses. You expected bosses to do whatever they could to get ahead, but a government official? Oh, that was criminal.

Luce rubbed her cheek against Brooke's knuckles, then turned her hand over and kissed Brooke's palm.

The soft crackle of Brooke's voice broke Luce's concentration. "How long have you been here, baby?"

"Hey. How are you feeling?" Luce smiled, stood, and kissed Brooke's forehead. "Are you thirsty?"

Brooke persisted. "How long?"

"Not long."

"Liar. You don't have to play nursemaid, honey." Brooke tapped her lips, and Luce complied. Delicately, she placed a soft kiss on Brooke's lips. Resting her forehead against Brooke's, she answered truthfully. "I'm going to be here every day until you get out."

"Honey," Brooke whispered. "You need to go back to work. They're taking good care of me. Don't worry."

But Luce did worry. Brooke hadn't healed as easily as the doctors hoped. She'd contracted a staph infection, and that added to the trauma her body was already fighting. They had to find another course of antibiotics, because the last one hadn't done the trick, so they'd hit her hard with stronger stuff. Even with all of Luce's money, she couldn't buy Brooke's health.

The doctors all said the same thing. "It's a marathon, not a race. So be prepared." She'd heard the comment so often that finally she told the doctors if they said it one more time, she couldn't be responsible for her actions.

"Luce?"

"Huh?"

"Go home." Brooke was trying to sound firm, her pale-bluish lips pressed into a thin, tight line.

"Stop," Luce said, patting Brooke's hand. Pulling the chair closer, she kissed her hands and smiled. "I'm not going anywhere. End of discussion."

Before she could say anything else, her phone buzzed. She ignored it and focused on Brooke.

"Are you going to get that? It could be important."

"No. I told Sammy and the guys not to call me under any circumstances, so it isn't business." The phone went dead. "See. It's not important."

Brooke put her cool hand on Luce's face, her thumbs running over Luce's top lip. "I love you."

"I love you, too," Luce said, then gently bit Brooke's thumb in a playful way.

"I want to start a family."

"What?" Luce asked around the thumb still in her mouth.

Brooke looked her and hooked her thumb, pulling Luce's face closer to hers. "I want to have kids. I want something that grounds us."

Luce just sat there, stunned. Kids? They hadn't even talked marriage, yet. Not that Luce

was opposed to marriage. Losing Brooke had solidified that longing. But family?

“Shouldn’t we get married first?” Luce said as she pulled the thumb from her lips.

“Are you asking?”

“Of course, but not like this...I mean...Well, this isn’t how I wanted to propose. Besides, we need to get you well, back on your feet.”

Luce stood and smoothed her button-down, tucking the tails of her shirt back into her slacks.

“I’m not saying right away, Luce. But someday”

“Oh, right. Okay, sure. Someday.”

Luce’s phone buzzed again. Without thinking, she pulled it and recognized the number. Poking the face, she sent it to voicemail, then cursed herself for even looking. Brooke’s request for kids had caught her off guard, discombobulated her world.

A parent?

Her?

Was she ready for that kind of responsibility? Her phone went off again, and once more, she looked at it without thinking. Sammy was persistent. He was also going to pay for his determination.

“You should probably get that. It must be important if they keep calling,” Brooke insisted.

“It’s just Sammy. He knows better. I gave him strict—”

“Then it is important. He wouldn’t risk your wrath unless something needed your attention.”

Brooke was right. Sammy knew better than to disregard her. Looking at Brooke, she nodded and pointed to the door. “I’ll take it in the hallway.”

“You don’t have to go outside. I’m awake.”

“Right,” Luce said, sitting down. Adjusting herself in the chair she had been intimate with over the past few weeks, Luce turned her head away from Brooke and whispered, “This better be life-or-death, Sammy.”

“Boss, I’m sorry to bother you, but you got a delivery.”

“That’s not life-or-death, Sammy.”

“Hmm—”

“Stick it in my office, and when I get there I’ll open it.”

“Well, I don’t think I can put it in your office.”

Now Luce was getting agitated. “Okay, take the fucking package to my house, and when I get home tonight, I’ll deal with it.”

“Uhm, Boss. I think you better come to the office. Now.”

Luce stood and stepped out into the hallway so Brooke couldn’t hear her yelling. “What the fuck is wrong with you, Sammy? Put the fucking package in—”

“Boss, it’s a woman.”

“What’s a woman?”

“The package. It’s a woman, and she says she needs to deliver a message to you. Says she’s supposed to give it only to you.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“No, I wish I was, but I think you need to get over here, now. I can’t explain it to you. You’ll have to see it with your own eyes.”

The hair on Luce’s neck stood on end. Sammy sounded strange. He never got frustrated

or scared, and he sure didn't call her about a situation when he could handle it himself. In fact, he rarely called her to handle a situation. That's why he was her second-in-command. She didn't have to micro-manage him, and he never let her down.

"Are you on speaker?"

"No."

"Okay, is someone forcing you to call me? You okay?"

"Boss, I just think you need to get over here. You know, I wouldn't call if it wasn't..."

Luce pressed him. "If it wasn't what?"

"I can't explain it, Boss."

"Don't move. I'm on my way."

"Please tell Ms. Erickson I'm sorry."

Luce didn't reply. She cut him off and stuffed the phone into her pocket as she whispered, "This better be fucking important."