

Chapter Three

“Everything all right?” Brooke whispered as she smoothed the veins on the back of Luce’s hand. Luce had been hovering ever since the attack. While she loved her girlfriend with all her heart, Luce was wearing a path in the cement of her kennel, acting like a pent-up pit bull with too much energy. It was starting to wear on her, too. “Honey, why don’t you find out what’s going on?”

Brooke tried to turn on her side to face Luce, but the knife wound she’d suffered seemed to pull no matter how she moved. Frank had almost taken her life, and all she could see on Luce’s face was revenge when the subject came up. Her ex, Colby Water, had come by to visit and give Luce some information on the status of the case against Luce. Whatever they’d talked about had gone right over Brooke’s head. The painkillers had made the last week an absolute blur, and justifiably so, the doctor had said when she complained. She needed to rest to recuperate. Now, if her body would just hurry things up.

When she was awake, she’d had lots of time to think. Her mind wandered to the what-ifs and what-could-have-beens, and all she knew was that she was thinking about long-term things, like marriage and kids. Brooke wasn’t certain Luce was on the same track as she was, but she wanted to find out. Sending out the first trial balloon had told her what she’d expected—Luce wasn’t quite ready, yet.

“Sweetheart?” Luce bent down and lay on the bed face-to-face with Brooke. “You okay?”

Brooke offered a slight smile. “Yeah. I’m good.” She reached up and ran her fingers along Luce’s cheek and then her lips. She caressed the slight bow of her top lip and then let her finger slip inside her mouth. “I love you.”

Luce bit the tip of Brooke’s finger, spearing her to her core.

Talking around her arousal, Luce smiled and said, “You’re going to make me forget you’re in a hospital.”

“Is that the only thing you ever think of?”

“Honestly? Maybe.”

“That’s my dragon.” Brooke pinched her chin and pulled Luce’s lips closer. Without further words, Brooke allowed Luce to roll her to her back and let her passion flair. Maybe that would help fire off some loose nervous energy. Before things could move any further, Luce’s phone went off again, the moment lost. At least for Brooke.

“You better get that.” She pulled back and smiled at her ardent lover.

“Grrr.” Luce pulled out the phone, looked at the screen, and then tucked it back into her jacket. “I better go. Sammy’s not going to give up.”

“I don’t know what’s going on, but promise me you’ll be careful.”

Luce picked up Brooke’s hand and kissed the back of it, then turned it over and kissed her palm. “I’ll tell you everything when I get back. I promise. No more keeping you in the dark.”

Brooke didn’t plan to make Luce keep that promise. Her business was sealed in secrecy, and it was probably better if she wasn’t a part of that side of Luce’s life. It had almost cost her her own life. However, it was her own fault. If she’d listened to Luce, she probably wouldn’t have been stabbed or watched Lynn die right in front of her.

She’d never forget seeing her bodyguard Lynn dead, lying in a pool of her own blood. Her vacant eyes still haunted Brooke’s dreams. In fact, she relived the whole day repeatedly, wishing the outcome had been different. But she couldn’t will a different set of circumstances for

them all. She would carry this scar for the rest of her life, like the one she wore. It would never leave her.

“You don’t have to tell me anything, honey. Your business is your business.”

“No. That’s what got us into this situation in the beginning. I pushed you away, thinking it was for your own good. But it only created an opening for someone to capitalize on, and look at the damage it caused, the lives that were lost. I’ll never forgive myself for what happened to you and Lynn.” Luce ducked her head and rubbed Brooke’s knuckles against the side of her face. “Ever,” she whispered.

“Give it time, sweetheart. Give it time. Now go. Sammy’s waiting.”

The gentleness with which Luce kissed her sent a shiver through Brooke. At least some things were starting to get back to normal.

“We should find out when you’re getting sprung from this place.”

“Not soon enough for me.” Brooke smiled and then motioned with her hands. “Shoo.”

“I’ll see you in a few hours.”

“Go.” Brooke made an attempt to shove Luce off her and toward the door, but her body was immovable.

“Are you that ready to get rid of me?” Luce was joking.

“No, my love, but the sooner you go and see what’s wrong with Sammy, the sooner you can fix the problem and come back.”

“Hmm.” Luce’s forehead creased with doubt.

“I’ll see you later.”

Without another word, Luce turned to leave.

“Can you turn off the lights, please?”

Luce looked back at Brooke and winked. “What did you have in mind?”

“Sleep,” she said flatly.

“Oh.” Hitting the lights, Luce said softly, “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Brooke wondered how her life had come to this. A simple reporter who was now the lover of a Yakuza crime boss. Now, the question was, would she finally be able to control that little dragon Luce carried around?

Luce pushed her SUV through the city. The quicker she handled the issue at the office, the quicker she could get back to Brooke. As for the Russian, well, his daughter still worked for Luce, and eventually he’d want to see her. When he did, Luce would be ready. She wasn’t a prisoner. Just the opposite. She could leave any time she wanted. Luce hoped she would, and when she did, Luce anticipated that she would lead them right to Petrov.

Luce pulled into her spot in front of Potter Enterprises and could see Sammy pacing, waiting for her. He stabbed the cigarette into the hot concrete and then picked up the butt.

“Boss, I’m so sorry, but she says she isn’t leaving. She has a message for you, and she says only she can give it to you. Said her life depended on it and—”

Luce put her hand up. “Sammy.”

“Yes, Boss.”

“Did you get Lynn’s family taken care of?”

Lynn’s death had hit Luce hard. Knowing Frank had killed her made it even tougher. She

hadn't spilled all the details of Lynn's death when she visited Lynn's parents. When they asked why, Luce had only one answer: she died in the service of another. The stoic face of Lynn's mother was the epitome of Japanese culture. She simply looked at Luce, closed her eyes, and bowed. She took her leave as Luce discussed the funeral arrangements and the money they would receive to compensate for the loss of their daughter. They knew the life of the Yakuza could be short, but to Luce, Lynn's death was unacceptable.

Turf wars weren't exactly uncommon for Luce and her business, so being at war with the Russian was the cost of doing business. Except he trafficked in drugs and flesh, and she didn't allow that type of trade in her territory. Clearly Petrov didn't like rules, but he liked battle, and it was clear one was raging between her and Petrov. Frank would be enemy number one in that war, and he was going down first. Whatever advantage Petrov thought he had by having Frank around would soon be a liability.

"Yes, Oyabun." Sammy bowed, then quickly opened the huge dragon door.

"I want you to personally visit her parents once a month and present them with the check."

"Yes, Oyabun."

"Now, tell me what the hell is going on in my office." Luce pressed the elevator button, pulled off her long black coat, and slung it over her arm. Pulling her arm in tight, she could feel the Beretta Nano just under her armpit. It gave her a sense of reassurance, tucked away in the nylon tank-top concealer. She'd started carrying her gun again, having become a bit lax just before the attack on Brooke, but that would never happen again.

"Who's in my office, Sammy?"

"Oyabun, if I told you, you wouldn't believe me. So you'll just have to see it for yourself."

"Who's in there with her?"

"Momo and Ms. Wentworth." Momo had replaced Lynn and moved up in the family ranks when Frank had killed her second, who was protecting Brooke. He'd regarded his position with the same intensity as Lynn had when she was in Luce's inner circle.

"Who's with Kat?"

Petrov's daughter, Kat, was Luce's bargaining chip, and she wasn't about to lose the one thing Petrov valued almost as much as money. He'd tried to plant Katerina in the club, trying to make Luce think she had simply applied for a job in Luce's new VIP club. The dancers she was hiring were actually designed to pump the VIPs for information on their business dealings, especially dealings Luce had a particular interest in. That had been Petrov's first mistake. He had underestimated Luce's connections and overestimated her libido. Luce had allowed Kat to stay on, in trade, and Luce kept her protected. More importantly, she was up a pawn in the chess game between her and Petrov.

"Sasha's with Kat."

"Seriously?" Luce gave him a cold stare.

"She volunteered," he said, nervously poking the button repeatedly. Sasha said she was bisexual; however, she knew Lynn and Sasha had been lovers. It had practically killed Sasha when Luce broke the news of Lynn's murder. Sasha went into a rage that took days to work itself out of her system. Then, well, Luce still didn't know what to expect from her number three. So she gave Sasha space. Now it sounded like she was after some catnip. At the moment, she was the least of Luce's problems.

"Did you check our guest for any weapons?"

“Of course,” Sammy said, holding the elevator door for Luce. “How is Ms. Erickson, Oyabun?”

Luce knew Sammy felt responsible for the attack on Brooke. She and Sammy had formed a connection after Sammy saved her from the two Russians who tried to carjack her. He had taken the call when Luce had refused to answer. She thought she was distancing Brooke from herself, protecting her. Instead, she’d practically put Brooke right in their hands.

“She’s getting better,” Luce said, clasping Sammy on the shoulder and squeezing.

That was as demonstrative as Luce would ever get with her family. She kept her emotions on a tight leash, especially after what had happened to Brooke and Lynn.

The elevator stopped and puked them out on Luce’s office floor. The hum of the office stopped the moment someone caught sight of Luce. She hadn’t been there in weeks, so she suspected everyone would be craning their necks and stop whatever they were doing the minute she arrived.

“Ms. Potter, it’s good to see you back,” Allie Wentworth, her assistant, said, making quick strides to keep up with her.

“Ms. Wentworth,” Luce said curtly.

“Shall I bring tea?”

“Have you offered any to our guest?”

Allie looked at Sammy and then back at Luce before answering. “No, ma’am. I was told not to go in.”

Luce walked past her assistant. “I see.” Then she turned toward Sammy and shot him a sideways glance. She placed her jacket on Allie’s desk and looked over at Sammy. “Then yes, please bring in tea and those cookies I like.”

Stopping in front of her door, she tossed a request over her shoulder. “And have a dozen red roses sent to Brooke.”

“Yes, ma’am, and you want the card to read...”

“No card needed.”

Luce slammed the door behind her, leaving Sammy and Allie staring at each other. The door opened briefly again and spit out Momo.

“Oh, shit,” he said, straightening his tie and coat.