

AMERICAN YAKUZA II
The Lies that Bind

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Dedication

Acknowledgements

Chapter One

Luce slowly lowered the lid of the casket. Her Lhaggard appearance reflected in the highly polished black lacquer as it finally rested closed. Tears threatened and she squeezed her eyes shut. She couldn't let them fall, not in front of her *family*. She wanted to be the last person to see the Oyabun. It was selfish of her but she didn't care, he was her only family and now she would bury him today. Luce gasped, finally releasing the breath she had been holding. Her heart seized and she clutched her chest, imagining her grandfather on the other side of the lid. So close and yet gone to her forever.

His last moments would forever be etched in her soul. As she bowed and kissed the casket, she remembered his last words to her.

"Come, sit next to me while I share my last moments on this earth with my favorite granddaughter," he said, weakly patting the bed.

Wiping at the tears streaming down her face, Luce replied as she always did when he said that. "I'm you're only granddaughter, Grandfather."

"Awe, but you're still my favorite." He brushed her tears away with a thumb. "Why are you crying Kaida? This day was preordained."

"I'm just being selfish. I don't want you to leave me. I have so much to learn still. Please Grandfather, please," she whispered, rubbing the back of his hand

against her wet face. "I'm sorry."

"Kaida, don't be sorry. I'm the one being selfish. Your grandmother has been waiting for me for two decades and I miss her." He pulled her hand to his frail lips and kissed the gold dragon pinkie ring he had given her last Christmas. "No one is promised tomorrow. It is a gift, and as such, we must cherish what we have been given. I have received many gifts for which I am thankful, and the most precious is you."

Pursing her lips, she tried to stop them from quivering, but could only shake her head. The lump in her throat stopped her from answering.

"Kaida, let me give you a few last words of wisdom from an old man." Tamiko licked his dry, cracked lips and swallowed hard. He labored to breath as he continued, "Kaida, as a tree struggles to find purchase in a granite rock it grows without assistance. It finds life where none should exist in the cracks of the hard rock, determined to grow, even when it should be impossible. Brooke is the tree to your rock. She gives you shade, grows with you when others would perish, and finds nourishment in your soul."

"She's a wonderful woman, grandfather."

"Then marry her. You are in a place now that will cause those around you to test you. You will find out when I die who is an ally and who is an enemy. Just as Frank betrayed us, others will, too. They will tell lies and make you doubt the truth when you are faced with it." Gently, he patted her hand in reassurance. "Brooke is your strongest supporter. Don't let her go, Kaida. She's wonderful for you. Good for your soul. I can see she softens your rough edges."

Luce smiled at the inference. She had definitely seen the world through different eyes since being with

Brooke. Her life felt complete and settled, not off kilter and skittering out of control as it had in the past.

“Promise me.”

Nodding she whispered, “I promise.”

“Good. Now, one last thing, Frank—”

“He’s a dead man when I find him,” she growled.

“I promise you that, too, Grandfather. He won’t live out the year.”

“He’s not just an enemy, he’s one of the worst kinds. He betrayed his own family and there’s no place for a man like that today. Remember, your word is your bond. It is the only thing, other than your name, that you can give freely. Do not take it lightly when you give it.”

“I remember, Grandfather. I haven’t forgotten our tea lessons.” Luce’s favorite time with her grandfather had also been those times when he would gently remind her of her duty in the world. “Take little and give much. Better to make ten friends than one enemy who could make one hundred enemies for you,” he would say.

“I understand, Grandfather.”

“Good. I’m tired, Kaida. I think I’d like to sleep now. Go and kiss Brooke for me.” He swished his hand about, as if he was shooing her away. “I love you, my little Kaida.” He closed his eyes and let out a long deep sigh.

“I know, Grandfather,” Luce said, clutching his hand as if it would keep him with her longer. “I love you, too.”

A blaring alarm broke the silence Luce had created in her mind when she spoke with her grandfather. A nurse ran in to assess the situation. She turned the heart machine off, patted Luce’s slumped shoulders and whispered, “Take as long as you need, Ms. Potter.”

Luce could only shake her head. Tears dripped from her chin as she stared at her grandfather, committing his face to memory for the last time.

Chapter Two

Brooke watched from outside the hospital room as the love of her life wept so hard it broke her heart. She and Luce had been on a long awaited vacation when the phone call came late on their first night in Hawaii. Forty-five minutes later, they were on a flight to Mercy Hospital. Luce hadn't left her grandfather's side since.

Brooke walked in and ran her palm across Luce's broad shoulders, Brooke bent down and whispered, "Luce, Honey. What can I do to help?"

Luce sat with her arms crossed and rocked back and forth. Brooke pulled the shivering Luce against her, and started threading her fingers through the unruly, thick black locks. Suddenly, Luce grabbed Brooke around the waist and buried her head against Brooke, weeping like a child. Moments like this were few and far between for them, so Brooke hugged her tightly, murmuring words of sympathy.

"Marry me."

"What?"

Brooke's chest tightened as she searched Luce's puffy, wet eyes. "That's not how I envisioned my first marriage proposal."

"You've never been asked before?"

"No and I don't think yours constitutes one right now either, honey."

"I don't want to lose you, too." Brooke sensed Luce

was panicking.

“I’m not going anywhere, sweetheart. It’s time to grieve and when it’s our time we’ll know it.”

Luce looked down at her grandfather and stroked his hand lovingly. *“I promised my grandfather that I would marry you, so—”*

“When you’ve had time to grieve and time to think rationally, ask me then.”

Luce nodded and buried her head against Brooke, clinging to her, and clutching her grandfather’s hand. Sobs wracked Luce, but Brooke could hold her lover tighter, wishing she could take this burden from her.

Squatting down, she held Luce’s face and kissed her gently, reassuringly. *“We’ll make it through this, Luce. I promise.”*



Luce stood anchored against the side of the casket. She wasn’t sure she could leave her grandfather, but she knew she needed to be strong for those sitting behind her.

“Luce, honey, are you all right?” Brooke touched her back softly, rubbing small circles.

Luce nodded back at Brooke and tried to give her a calming smile. It barely broke, but it was there. *“I’m okay.”*

Luce faced the crowded temple. She looked out over the somber faces that filled the room to capacity, searching for one she knew best, Auntie. Auntie sat stoically in the front row dabbing at her eyes. She had seen as much death as Luce and was always the one sitting next to her at times like this. Auntie was the last one of her *family*. She was surprised to learn that

her grandfather had owned the Korean restaurant she enjoyed weekly, and in his will he had left it to Auntie. Smiling at her Aunt, Luce nodded and winked, then addressed the crowded room. “Thank you everyone for coming. My grandfather would have been humbled by all the kind words and memories each of you have shared with us.” Her voice cracked as she held back tears that threatened to fall. Her swollen eyes welled up with endless tears. “We’ve planned a dinner at his favorite restaurant and hope you’ll join us there to celebrate his life and share more of your stories. Thank you for coming.”

With that, the ceremony was over. Luce waited, shaking the hand or accepting hugs of condolences from everyone who streamed past the casket. She heard Brooke as each member of the *family* filed past and treated her with the honor reserved for a wife—Luce’s wife.

“Sammy, can you bring the car around?” Brooke whispered as he approached.

“Of course, Ms. Erickson,” he offered with a low bow. “Oyabun, my deepest sympathies. He was like a father to me. I’m—so—sorry.”

Luce clasped his hand between hers and pulled him close. “Be strong, brother. He was proud of you. So am I.”

Sammy bowed and without another word excused himself. The line before Luce stretched out and around the temple. It would take time to greet everyone, but her duty was such that she would be honored to hear the small stories of how the Oyabun had helped someone, friended them, or simply made them feel more secure in the neighborhood. Clearly, her grandfather was loved, and she now had to share

his final moments above ground with those who cared about him, too.

“Are you okay, my love?” Brooke whispered. She rubbed Luce’s back again, but smiled at a stoic face.

“I’ll be okay.”

“I’ll send them away and we can leave if you’re too tired to do this.”

“They loved him as much as I did. No, I’ll stay and honor his memory.”

The line moved slowly, but finally they had shaken the last hand. The temple was empty save for the long, black lacquered casket, Luce and Brooke. Luce melted into the front pew and buried her hands in her face to shield herself. She wanted to let her tears fall and knew she couldn’t stop once they started, even if she tried. The memories of her mother’s funeral came flooding back as she thought about all the tough things in her life her grandfather had seen her through. This time she would have to do it alone. In fact, this was the new normal for the rest of her life.

Brooke’s warm embrace pulled Luce closer and she rested her head on Luce’s. She wasn’t alone. Not really, she had Brooke.

One night after a fight with Brooke, she had sought her grandfather’s counsel. “*Don’t let pride be another person in your relationship, Kaida. It will add nothing and only cause you misery. Let yourself lean on Brooke. She is strong. Be weak with her, she’ll understand.*”

Luce wrapped her arms around Brooke’s waist and nuzzled her wet nose into Brooke’s neck.

“Kaida, will you be okay?” an old, knowing voice caressed her ear.

She looked up and gave her Aunt a weak smile.

“I’ll be fine, Auntie. Will you join us at the mausoleum?”

“No, I’ve seen the inside of that thing one to many times. Besides, this is a family moment. The old man and I fought like a couple of junk yard dogs.” Auntie patted Luce’s back. “I’ll see you at the restaurant.”

“No matter what you say, I know you two cared for each other. He left you the restaurant. That isn’t the action of an enemy, Auntie.”

“No.” Auntie dabbed at the corner of her wrinkled eyes. “He could be one of the most generous men, Kaida. Never forget that, no matter what?”

Luce frowned at the cryptic remark, but let it pass. She loved her grandfather beyond measure and knew how generous he could be. *Hell*, she was the biggest benefactor of his mentoring and time.

“I’ll remember that, Auntie. Thank you for coming. I’ll see you at the restaurant, then.”

Kissing her Aunt on each cheek, she accepted the warm embrace in return and sighed. She hoped she wouldn’t be attending her funeral anytime soon. She shook her head, shamed at letting that thought have wings.

“Ready to go?”

“I want to wait and walk him to the hearse.”

“Okay.”

“I love you,” Luce whispered then sucked in a breath.

“Here, sweetheart.” Brooke offered another tissue.

“Thanks. What would I do without you?”

“You would manage, I’m sure of it.”

“I wouldn’t. You’ve turned my world upside down and I wouldn’t know how to right it without you.”

“We’re ready, Ms. Potter.” A stately looking man

said. Luce was sure his sincere expression had been practiced many times.

Brooke grasped her arm to help her up, but the gesture only made her feel more helpless. Luce shook off the assistance and stood ramrod straight. She'd had her moment of grief, now it was time to accept her responsibilities and make her grandfather proud. Yet, with her emotions so raw, she knew just a wrongly spoken word would be her undoing.

"Let's take your grandfather home, honey."

"He loved you so much." Luce patted Brooke's hand firmly clasped in hers. "You were one of the last things we spoke of before he died."

"He was a wonderful man, Luce. You were lucky to have him and he was lucky to have you. I think the admiration was mutual."

Luce followed the casket to the hearse, watching as her grandfather was loaded into the cavernous mouth for the journey to his final resting place. The Yoshida family crypt was the destination for all Yoshidas, including herself. Some day she would lie next to her mother and hopefully, when that day came, she would face it with the same dignity as her grandfather had.

The slamming door almost made Luce's knees buckle as she searched through the window for one last glimpse.

"Shall we, Ms. Potter?" The same man pointed to the limo behind the hearse.

"Thank you, but I have my own car and driver."

Sammy stood waiting to open the door to Luce's car, where six men and women from Luce's inner circle waited.

"They'll escort my grandfather into the crypt."

"As you wish, Ms. Potter."

Luce motioned for Sammy and the others followed, each face sullen. A few wiped tears from their eyes as they climbed into the limo.

“We’re so sorry, Oyabun,” Lynn said, bowing.

“Thanks. I’ll see you at the cemetery. Ready, Sammy?”

Sammy had been by her side since Frank had dishonored her family by switching sides to become a player in the Russian mafia. He was the reason Sammy had lost his pinkie, and Luce carried that guilt as a constant reminder every time she looked at Sammy. He had proven indispensable when he helped locate her father. Sammy watched as she killed JP Potter, wanting to do the deed himself, but understanding Luce’s need to exact revenge for her mother’s death and her father’s betrayal.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Luce gently tugged on Brooke’s hand and waited for her to climb in before speaking to Joey. “Any news on Frank’s whereabouts?”

“Not yet, Oyabun.”

Luce patted Sammy’s shoulder and looked away. “How’s the finger?”

“All healed.”

“Good. Let’s get going. I’m ready for this day to be over.”

“Yes, Oyabun.”

Luce slid next to Brooke and intertwined their fingers. Brooke scrubbed her cold hand and then blew warm breath on it. Luce’s heart felt as cold as her hands. She wished something could reach in and warm her soul.

“Where are your gloves, my love?”

“I don’t know. Probably sitting on my dresser at

home.” Luce gave a thin smile as Brooke continued to work on her cold hands.

“Sammy, can you turn on the heat for the Oyabun?”

Luce jerked her head in Brooke’s direction and stared at her. She had never used that term before and Luce wasn’t sure how she felt about it. The title was honorific for the men and women who worked for her, but for her most intimate lover to call her Oyabun seemed strange.

“Why did you call me that?”

“What?”

“Oyabun, why did you call me that?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you. I just thought—”

Luce pressed her finger against Brooke’s lips to stop her. “It’s fine, but we share something much more intimate. Oyabun is reserved for those who work for me, not for you. You’re special and I don’t want to blur those lines, ever.”

“I’m sorry.”

Luce’s nerves were raw, exposed, and ready to snap any moment. It took every ounce of control to restrain her anger. *But why am I angry?* she wondered. She wasn’t angry at Brooke; she had been nothing but supportive. The Russians were at bay, so they weren’t a factor. She would find Frank and exact the debt that he owed her family, although it was just her, now. Her grandfather had left her an orphan. He had chosen to release his grasp on life and leave her here alone. She’d been left behind to sort out the rest of her life by herself.

Luce gasped and then swallowed hard. She was angry with her grandfather for dying.

Chapter Three

Are you all right?” Brooke’s voice echoed the worry she felt in her heart. She had never seen Luce so despondent, so dark, so not in control of her emotions. It broke her heart to see how deep Luce had fallen into the depths of despair. Yet, all she could do was offer a kind word, a shoulder to cry on, and a warm heart to extend to her lover.

“I’m fine. I just realized why I’m angry.”

“You’re angry? Why?”

“Because my grandfather left me.” Luce turned and watched the gray clouds roll by, mirroring her own mood. “I know I’m being completely selfish, but I still feel like I need him.”

“Luce, the cancer was more advanced than the doctors even knew.”

“I know. But he...” She held her breath and focused on the emerald eyes of the dragon pinkie ring she twisted around her finger. She hated herself for what she was about to give voice to. “He didn’t even fight it. He surrendered and gave up. That’s not the man I knew.”

“Oh, Luce. Don’t judge him too harshly. He lived without the love of his life for almost twenty years. He’s watched as his family died, his friends betrayed him, and his granddaughter made a successful entry into the family business.” Brooke turned Luce’s face towards hers. “He believed in you and knew you could

handle anything, otherwise he would still be here with us.”

New tears etched their way down Luce’s face as Brooke continued, “Your grandfather placed everything in your hands for a reason. He told you on more than one occasion that he trusted no one but you.”

“You’re my voice of reason. You make me see things in ways I might not have otherwise.”

“You would have eventually seen it, my love. Right now, your heart is wounded and can only react. In time it will see reason again, but for now it’s time to grieve.”

The trip to the cemetery was short, leaving little time to discuss the future. They pulled in front of the marble mausoleum. The Yoshida name splashed across the top in big, bold letters. She pulled out her gloves and handed them to Luce. “Here, it’s freezing outside and I don’t want you catching a cold.”

“I’m fine.”

“Luce.”

“Thank you. It is chilly out,” Luce conceded. She pinched Brooke’s cheeks, and kissed her. “What would I do without you?”

“You’d—”

“I know, I know, *manage*.”

Brooke took Sammy’s hand and slipped out of the limo, waiting for Luce to join her. The cold seeped through her heavy coat and assaulted her bare legs. She should have opted for slacks, but she had come straight from her office to meet Luce at the temple. She was glad she could be there with Luce when her grandfather died. No one should be alone when they pass, or be alone to witness a loved one take that leap

to the other side.

Brooke grabbed Luce's hand to pull her close. She landed a quick kiss on Luce's cheek just as the pallbearers unloaded Tamiko's casket. They moved quietly in slow precision to the massive mausoleum. Inside, golden light reflected off the white and grey marble, giving Brooke an artificial sense of warmth. Brooke gazed down the small hallway where an altar had been prepared with a beautifully framed picture of Tamiko, his wife, and Luce's mother. A prayer bench sat in front of it, waiting, as if calling to Brooke to pay her respects. She'd knelt on enough prayer benches in the Catholic Church to recognize the scent of burning incense and candles. It had been years since her last appearance at church, but not so long that she'd forgotten the symbolism, the smells, and the traditions attending mass had ingrained in her.

Brooke grabbed Luce's upper arm and tightened the grip on her hand. She leaned closer, hoping Luce would absorb some of her strength. The casket slid into the wall. Luce sucked in a breath and held it. The pallbearers retreated out to the limo, leaving Luce and Brooke alone as the marble front was set in place. The room was eerily quiet. They stood there staring at the marble slab inscribed with Tamiko's name, his birth and his death dates neatly chiseled, black on the gray marble.

"Luce?"

"Hmm?"

"It's cold, honey. We should go," Brooke whispered. "When you're ready of course."

Luce pulled Brooke into a tight embrace. She leaned down and laid her forehead on Brooke's shoulder. Her soft sobs echoed off the cold walls of the

room.

Brooked rocked her, squeezing Luce tightly. “It’ll be all right, sweetheart. Trust me, we can make it through this. I promise.”

“I know. I just want to get it all out before leaving this room. Once I’m out that door, I won’t cry again,” she said, swallowing hard.

If it had been anyone else, Brooke would doubt her resolve, but Luce was another story. She hadn’t shed a tear after killing her father—if that is what you could call JP Potter. She had strength beyond measure, so if she said it, it would happen. Brooke, on the other hand, knew she would cry like a baby for weeks if anything happened to her parents or grandmother. That was just the way she was built. Brooke had cried for weeks when her photographer, Mike, had been killed on a mission in Europe. They had worked together for almost three years. Losing him the way she did was the whole reason she’d gotten out of investigative journalism. She and Luce were two different women who viewed life and death from diverse spectrums.

“I’m ready.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“We have guests at the restaurant. Let’s go listen to stories about my grandfather.”



Through the long lens of the camera, she could almost make out the couple holding each other in the mausoleum. The glare off the door made it impossible to get a clear photo. Sliding back out of the car window,

she started snapping when they walked out holding hands.

“Awe fuck, tell me that isn’t Brooke Erickson.”

“Why, do you know her?”

“You could say that. *Shit.*”

“Didn’t you notice her at the funeral?” The man sitting next to her in the front seat asked.

“Nope, couldn’t get a clear shot of her, just the back of her head. *Shit!*”

“I heard someone saying that they were going to some Japanese restaurant for the wake.”

“Good, we can get shots of all the Yakuza members there. There’ll be Yakuza from all over the US showing up to pay their respects to the new Oyabun.” She adjusted the lens and snapped off a few more shots before laying the high-powered camera in her lap. “Brookie, Brookie, Brookie, since when did you get mixed up with a crime family like the Yoshidas?”

She pulled a pad from her blazer and scribbled something down. She handed it to the man with instructions. “Have someone pull the file on this name and tell them to get me everything they have on her.”

“You got it.”

“Damn, this is gonna get messy.”



The reflection of the camera lens caught Luce’s attention. Rolling her gaze towards the blue sedan, she could make out two occupants, but that was all. She’d expected undercover police to hover outside her grandfather’s funeral. It irritated her that they would follow her to the cemetery. If she could, she would have closed it down to only her party, but the attendant