



Ethan's Command (Team KOA Charlie #4)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: She swore she'd never forgive him. Now, he's the only one who can save her.

Brooklyn Alexander thought she was done with Ethan Foster. Six months ago, they shared one unforgettable night—then he disappeared without a word. Now, she's too busy with her nephew Liam to worry about old wounds. But when a chilling kidnapping attempt puts Liam in danger, Brooklyn has no choice but to turn to the one man she swore she'd never trust again.

Ethan never meant to ghost Brooklyn. A concussion stole twenty-four hours of his life, and with it, any memory of the night they spent together. But when Brooklyn comes to him for help, the past no longer matters—only keeping her and Liam safe. As they uncover a terrifying link to the Yakuza, the stakes skyrocket, and Ethan will stop at nothing to protect them. When Liam is taken, the race to find him is harrowing. But when Brooklyn is kidnapped next, Ethan faces the ultimate nightmare. He lost her once—he won't lose her again.

Not when she's his to protect.

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CHAPTER 1

Arms crossed tightly over her chest, Brooklyn Alexander stared at her nephew and tried to maintain some semblance of calm. “Because I said so.” God, she hated the Mom-tone in her words. She exhaled, softening her tone. “Liam, we talked about this. No more video games after school with your friends until after the science fair. It’s this weekend, so it’s not like you have to wait long. Today is Tuesday. Sunday afternoon, once everything is over, you and your friends can play again.”

“But that’s so long,” Liam groaned, dragging out the word. His shoulders slumped under the weight of disappointment. “There’s a new mod, and the guys are downloading it today. They’ll get to play it and finish before I even get to start.”

Brooklyn glanced at Liam’s friends, who were all sitting in front of their laptops staring at the screens as if they were still playing the game. She knew they were listening, so she resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Instead, she softened her expression. “Liam, you love science. You were so excited about the fair. Your project is amazing—it deserves to be finished.”

“Fine,” Liam muttered, slamming his laptop closed. He stood and glanced around. “Where’s my backpack?”

Nakoa pointed toward Liam’s backpack which was by his feet. Snatching the bag off the floor with a dramatic huff, Liam started packing up his stuff.

“Where’s Ren?” Brooklyn asked. Ren was the fourth musketeer and Liam’s closest friend.

“He wasn’t in school today,” Nakoa offered.

“Or yesterday,” Keoni added. “We haven’t seen him since Monday when we played here after school. I heard one of the teachers say he’s out sick.”

“Liam, did you check on him? See if he needed anything?”

Liam grunted. “He said he’s fine.” His stuff all packed, Liam stormed toward the door of the coffee shop, his sneakers squeaking on the tile floor. He ignored his friends when they called their alohas.

“See you later, boys.” Brooklyn shook her head and headed after Liam. She glanced at Dave, the café owner, who was standing behind the counter with a knowing grin.

“You’ve got your hands full,” Dave teased, his deep voice tinged with humor as he reached for the phone behind the counter.

“You don’t know the half of it,” she replied, managing a smile in return. “Thanks, Dave.”

And she meant it. Dave Akana was a gem of a human. He let Liam and his friends hang out in the back of his café after school, gaming on the café’s reliable internet. His rules were simple: no yelling and no swearing. As long as the boys respected the space and didn’t disturb other customers, they were welcome. Brooklyn appreciated his generosity more than words could express.

Dave’s Café was a cozy, unassuming place on a quiet corner of town. The fragrant aroma of coffee and freshly baked pastries usually greeted her as soon as she walked through the door. The chatter of regulars added to the welcoming atmosphere. She couldn’t imagine a safer space for Liam and his friends to hang out.

Liam ran a tab for snacks—chips, cookies, sodas—all the essentials for an after-school hangout, which either she or her brother paid off at the end of the month. It was a small price to pay to keep Liam entertained and out of trouble. Dave understood that better than most. He'd told her stories of his own teenage years that raised the hair on her arms. To say his life had been rocky was an understatement. Baking had given him a direction and a livelihood, and he was determined to provide kids with a safe space where they could just be kids.

Brooklyn hurried to catch the door before it shut and stepped out onto the bustling sidewalk. The late afternoon sun was beginning to dip, casting long shadows across the pavement. Liam was already stomping down the sidewalk, his backpack bouncing with each angry step. His lanky frame, all elbows and knees, was a growing resemblance to his father's and grandfather's tall builds. Brooklyn, on the other hand, had taken after her mother—short and curvy.

She tucked a few strands of blonde hair behind her ear as she followed in Liam's wake, her scrubs rustling with every step. He was a great kid, she reminded herself. He was just upset. Jackson, Liam's father, had called the night before with the news that he wouldn't make it to the science fair. Liam had been crushed.

Jackson had sounded heartbroken on the phone, too, but the trip to Japan was a big opportunity. Brooklyn didn't fault him for taking it even though it meant disappointing his son. Jackson had only been with the company for eight months, and they were already asking for his input on strategy. It was everything he'd dreamed of, and Brooklyn was thrilled for him. That didn't stop her from wishing he could have been here for Liam.

Liam reached the corner and stopped, waiting for the light to change. Brooklyn quickened her pace. Maybe she could salvage the evening. "Liam!" she called. "Wait up. Let's grab some takeout."

Liam turned to face her just as the squeal of tires shattered the calm afternoon. A white van screeched to a halt in front of him, and the sliding door flew open. Two men jumped out.

Brooklyn's heart stopped. Her world narrowed into a tunnel, and all she could see was Liam. Her purse slipped from her shoulder, hitting the sidewalk with a thud, as she broke into a sprint. "Liam!" she screamed, her voice raw with terror.

The men were on him, their hands yanking at his arms as they tried to wrestle him toward the van. They were young—teenagers, maybe—but that didn't make them any less dangerous.

Brooklyn didn't think, didn't hesitate. She threw herself at the man on Liam's left, slamming her hand into his throat with a sharp cry. He staggered back, coughing and clutching his neck. Her grip on Liam's arm was fierce, pulling him back as the other man, a stocky brute with bulging muscles, tightened his hold.

"Hey!" a voice yelled from behind them. "I'm calling 9-1-1!"

The stocky man froze, his dark eyes flicking toward the voice. With a curse, he let go of Liam, grabbed his coughing companion, and shoved him back into the van. The door slammed shut, and the vehicle roared across the intersection, disappearing into the chaos of traffic.

Brooklyn pulled Liam into her arms, her hands trembling as she checked him over. "Are you okay? Liam, are you okay?" Her voice cracked as she ran her hands over his arms and shoulders, searching for any sign of injury.

"I—I think so," Liam stammered, his wide eyes swimming with fear. His small frame trembled against her.

“You’re okay,” Brooklyn whispered, holding him tight. “You’re okay, honey. You’re okay.” She repeated it like a mantra, as much for herself as for him.

“Are you two okay?” Dave’s voice broke through the fog. He jogged up to them, concern etched across his face. “Pika said you were in trouble.”

Brooklyn glanced over to see the man who had shouted standing nearby, holding her purse. He stepped forward and offered it to her.

“Pika—” she broke off when her voice trembled. She cleared her throat and then said, “I can’t thank you enough. You scared them away.”

“I think you did a damn fine job of that yourself,” Pika replied, a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. “That throat strike was something else. You’ve got serious moves.”

Liam looked up, pride flashing across his pale face. “My aunt has a black belt in Taekwondo.”

Brooklyn managed a brief smile for him before turning back to her rescuers. “Thank you. Both of you. I’m... profoundly grateful.”

The wail of sirens cut through the evening air, and moments later, two police cars screeched to a halt. Brooklyn let out a shaky breath, the reality of what had just happened beginning to sink in.

Four police officers approached, their boots crunching against the pavement as they stepped out of their cars. The flashing red and blue lights cast a surreal glow over the scene, making Brooklyn’s heart race all over again.

“Ma’am, are you the one who called it in?” one of the officers asked, his voice calm

but professional.

Pika moved closer. “Nah, it was me.”

Brooklyn tightened her arm protectively around Liam, who trembled as he crowded close to her side. Her voice wavered when she explained, “We were just on the sidewalk, and the van came out of nowhere. It stopped in front of Liam, and they tried to drag him in.”

The first officer stepped closer. He was tall and muscular, his uniform fitting a little too snugly over his broad shoulders. His sharp gaze flicked between Liam and Brooklyn. “You say this van just pulled to the curb in front of your son?”

“He’s not my son—he’s my nephew,” Brooklyn corrected, her voice firmer now.

“Okay. But it pulled to the curb in front of your nephew?”

“Yes,” she said, her tone rising slightly. “They tried to pull him in.”

The officers exchanged glances, a silent conversation passing between them. The first officer’s partner, wearing a badge that read Nakamura, stepped forward. He had a calm demeanor and a more approachable air, though his brow furrowed as he asked, “By any chance, were these guys young? Sort of looked like teenagers?”

Brooklyn hesitated, the adrenaline still bubbling through her veins. “Yes, they were. Well, at least I thought so at first. They might have been a little older than that now that I think about it,” she confirmed, her voice unsteady. “It was startling—terrifying, actually. They just grabbed Liam like he was a sack of flour. I... I have no idea why they would target him. I don’t even know how they would’ve found him. We aren’t usually around here on Tuesdays.”

The first officer, whose name tag read Peterson, crossed his arms over his broad chest. “They didn’t target him exactly,” he said, his tone matter of fact.

Brooklyn’s chest tightened, shortening her breath. “What do you mean?” she squeaked.

Dave moved closer to her, his reassuring presence a steadying force. Brooklyn glanced at him briefly before turning back to Peterson.

“We’ve had a rash of these things happening,” Peterson explained, his expression hardening. “Apparently, it’s the latest game. These teens roll up, grab a kid, drive around with them for a block or two—ten minutes tops—and then drop them off, holding them just long enough to scare the hell out of the kid. It appears to be some kind of gang initiation for the teens.”

He shook his head, his jaw tightening. “I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s some stupid trend they saw on TikTok or whatever social media crap they’re into these days. Anyway, it’s terrifying for the kid.” He glanced at Liam, his expression softening slightly. “But there’s no real harm done. Now, if we can find them, we’ll charge them with kidnapping. We want this to stop. But, in the end, it seems to be just a prank.”

“Peterson, we’re heading,” one of the other officers from the second car called. He gestured to his radio. Peterson nodded and then turned back to face them.

No harm done? What kind of BS was that? Brooklyn tightened her hold on Liam and glared at Peterson. “This isn’t a game!” she snapped. “It was terrifying—for me and for Liam. Don’t you want us to at least look at some pictures or sit with a sketch artist?”

Peterson smirked, clearly amused by her outburst. “Somebody watches too much TV. We don’t have that kind of manpower here. We don’t keep a sketch artist on hand. If

you want to whip something up yourself or know someone who can, that'd be great. In the meantime, we'll pull CCTV and security camera footage to see if we can figure out what kind of van it was."

"It was a white Chevrolet Express Cargo van," Liam said quietly, his voice trembling but certain. "Older model, probably early 2010s."

Peterson raised an eyebrow, clearly surprised. "That's awfully specific. You sure about that?"

Liam nodded, his chin lifting slightly. "I'm into cars. I recognized it. I even have one in my collection."

Peterson snorted. "You still play with cars?"

Liam's face turned red. "No," he said, his voice firm. "I have a car collection."

Brooklyn clenched her jaw, fighting the urge to slap the smug look off Peterson's face. Instead, she placed a calming hand on Liam's shoulder. "Alright," she said through gritted teeth. "Can we just give you our information?"

"Sure," Peterson replied, still smirking. He handed her a notebook and pen.

Brooklyn wrote down her name, address, and phone number with a shaking hand, then passed the notebook to Dave. He quickly jotted down his details before handing it to Pika, who added his information as well.

Peterson took the notebook back and nodded. "Okay, folks. Try to relax and have a good evening. We'll be in touch if anything comes up."

Without another word, he and his partner strolled back to their patrol car. The engine

roared to life, and they drove off, leaving Brooklyn standing there with her arms around her nephew.

Brooklyn knelt in front of Liam, her heart still pounding. “How about we get some takeout and go home?”

Liam’s face was still pale and his body trembling, but he mustered up a tight smile and nodded. Brooklyn stood and wrapped an arm around his shoulders, her maternal instincts kicking into overdrive.

She turned to Dave and Pika. Her voice broke with gratitude. “I can’t thank you two enough. You saved us.”

“I think you did a pretty good job of that yourself,” Dave said with a small smile.

Pika nodded. “Agreed. That cop didn’t seem too interested, but I’ll keep an eye out. If I hear anything, I’ll let Dave know. We can’t have this happening again. Kids shouldn’t have to live in fear.”

Brooklyn nodded, her throat too tight to respond. She started walking toward her car with Liam glued to her side. Her legs felt like jelly, and every step was an effort. All she wanted to do was lock the doors, pour herself a glass of wine, and somehow forget this incident ever happened.

CHAPTER 2

Brooklyn set her glass of wine down on the counter and collapsed onto the stool by the breakfast bar. Liam had finally gone to bed, and she'd just checked on him to make sure he was asleep. She wasn't entirely sure he'd be able to sleep after the ordeal they'd been through.

When they got home, she'd done her best to reassure him. She'd told him it was just a prank, that it would never happen again, and that he didn't need to worry. But honestly, she was still a tangle of nerves. It had taken her quite a while to get him calmed down. After they finished eating their takeout dinner and Liam finished his homework, they watched one of his favorite TV shows. Then she'd even let him play online with his friends for half an hour. Finally, after he'd yawned several times, she sent him off to bed.

She took a long swallow of her wine. She'd wanted a glass the moment they got home, but she knew drinking in front of Liam would only scare him more. She rarely drank around him, and she wasn't about to start tonight. A shiver ran through her. She was damn glad she'd taken Taekwondo. If they'd managed to get Liam into the van... Well, she didn't want to think about it.

Her phone rang and she immediately answered it. "Christie." A lump instantly formed in her throat, and she couldn't continue.

"What is it?" her best friend and fellow dental hygienist demanded. "What's wrong?"

"Oh my God, Christie," Brooklyn managed to get out before her eyes filled with

tears.

“Tell me everything.”

Brooklyn relayed the whole tale. She felt horrible wrecking Christie’s vacation back home in Boston, but she’d needed to talk to someone. “Don’t give it another thought,” Christie said. “You did the right thing calling me.”

“Why are you even up?” Brooklyn asked. “Isn’t it about two in the morning?”

“Jet lag.”

“How’s back home?” Brooklyn sipped her wine.

“It’s great to see everyone, but I miss the Big Island already. It’s fun to visit but I am over living here.”

Relief flooded Brooklyn’s chest. She’d been worried her best friend would move back home and leave her with just some acquaintances here on the Big Island.

“How are you doing? I know Liam is super special to you. Are you okay?” Christie’s voice was filled with concern.

Liam was the one good thing to come out of her brother’s disastrous marriage to Deanna. Every day, she was grateful Deanna decided motherhood wasn’t for her. When Jackson and Liam moved to the Big Island, she’d been devastated. They’d all lived in New Jersey up until then, and Brooklyn got to see Liam at least once a week. After losing their parents in a car crash five years ago, she and Jackson had become really close.

She often wondered if Jackson and Liam hadn’t left whether she’d still be with Nate.

Once her brother and nephew headed to Hawai'i, her relationship with her longtime boyfriend had tanked. She turned to her Nate to fill the void only to find out that he wasn't interested in supporting her emotionally. Theirs had been a one-sided relationship. He liked her because she took care of him. Made sure his world ran smoothly, but he had no interest in hers. How she could have been so blind to that, she didn't know.

She finally replied to Christie, "I have to say, if Jackson and Liam hadn't left I might still be with Nate."

"Ugh. From everything you've said about him, I'm so glad you're not."

Good-looking and smart, Nate worked in finance in New York City. He was going places, and he wanted someone to keep him organized and do all the menial tasks that life threw his way. Brooklyn didn't mind when she thought he loved her as well. He made money and they had a great lifestyle. He was so desirable on paper, but it hadn't taken her long, once she paid attention, to discover that Nate, in reality, was just an arrogant jackass.

"Yeah, I'm not really over the sting of the affair." She rubbed her face with one hand. "It makes me question my judgment, you know?"

"I do, but I think you're being too hard on yourself. Nate took advantage of you, and you loved him so you believed him. We all do things like that. I think you should give yourself a break. Now, go to bed and try to get some sleep. Put all of this behind you. Call me if you need to. I'm here no matter what time, okay?"

"Thanks, Christie."

"I know you'd do it for me as well."

Brooklyn disconnected the call, feeling much better than when she'd answered. Christie was a miracle worker like that. Taking another sip of wine, Brooklyn's mind wandered back to Nate.

The affair shouldn't have been a surprise, but she'd been blindsided. His cheating had been a total shock. She'd said she was going to go with friends for a girls' weekend, but her friend's car had broken down and another friend had been called back to work. Brooklyn hadn't seen the point of staying on her own. She was already lonely enough without her brother and Liam. So, she'd turned around and gone back to their apartment in Hoboken.

Opening the door to find her boyfriend fucking his assistant on her counter was the shock of the century.

Well, until those men tried to grab Liam.

She'd stood in the doorway, mouth open in shock, staring. It had taken Nate a few thrusts to even know there was something wrong. Then he'd turned and saw her. Instant limp dick. The assistant, Candice, had tried to continue, but when he didn't respond, she'd said, "Fuck, Nate, what the hell is your problem." Then she turned and stared at Brooklyn.

"Get the fuck out." Those were the words that left Brooklyn's lips. She didn't scream or holler. She didn't freak out. Just, "Get the fuck out." The irony was, the apartment was hers. She'd bought it with her parents' help years ago when it was still affordable. It had a fantastic view and a central location. Nate loved it. He crowed about it every chance he got.

He'd left with Candice in tow, but he'd come back hours later trying to argue that it was her fault. Because she'd ignored him for so long. But now that she was more focused on him, things would be better. He wouldn't stray again. She'd stood there in

the hallway listening to him spew his lies, wondering how she could have gotten it so wrong.

Nate wouldn't leave, so she'd told him she was hungry and suggested he go to get food from their favorite Chinese food place, promising they could discuss their relationship over dinner. The moment he got into the elevator, she'd gone back into the apartment and finished packing his stuff. She had it all out and down in the lobby before he was back. She'd given the doorman strict instructions not to let Nate back up and to call the cops if necessary. That was the last time she'd spoken to Nate. He'd called repeatedly and left pleading messages, which escalated to nasty ones when she hadn't responded. She'd ignored it all.

When Jackson had called, practically begging her to come live with them after only a few months in Hawaii, she'd sold her place, packed her bags, and left without so much as a backward glance. She'd never felt so much relief as she had on the flight across the Pacific. A fresh start was just what she needed.

Jackson had invited her to live with him and Liam, and as much as she loved her brother and her nephew, Brooklyn refused to sponge off them. She needed her own space and time to get herself together. She found a job at a dental practice and then bought this little house. To her surprise, she loved it. All of it. She'd fallen in love with the house as soon as she'd set eyes on it. The Big Island had quickly become home.

Her new life was idyllic; surfing, hanging out with friends, and feeling a part of the community. The patients at her dental office were mostly elderly, and she loved helping them. And Hawai'i was paradise. Sure, she missed the seasons in New Jersey, but didn't miss the snow. Besides, she reminded herself, she had a birthmark that resembled the shape of the Big Island on her back so it must have been fate that she come here and start her life over.

The only dark cloud that lingered was her constant second-guessing herself when it came to men. She'd made the wrong choice once, and the way it ended was humiliating. She grimaced. Make that twice. She'd made the wrong choice again when she'd first come to Hawai'i. She blew out a breath and tried to banish the image of the man who'd captured her attention, if not her heart, from her mind. Christie was wrong. She wasn't being hard enough on herself when it came to the men in her life.

Her phone rang, pulling her out of her thoughts. She glanced at the screen—it was Jackson. Should she tell him about what happened today? She didn't want to worry him, especially when this meeting was such a big deal for his career. But he was Liam's father, and if the roles were reversed, she'd want to know.

Brooklyn answered the call.

"Brooklyn! How's it going? How's Liam?"

"He's fine. He's asleep."

"Yeah, I figured. I just wanted to check in. Is he still upset about me missing the science fair?"

"Yes," Brooklyn said honestly. "He really wanted you there."

Jackson sighed. "I know. I really wanted to be there too, but I can't pass up this opportunity."

"You made the right decision," Brooklyn reassured him. "He'll get over it."

"How's his project going?"

"Really well. He's almost finished. He's going to get up early tomorrow to work on it

some more.”

“Kid’s got a future in engineering,” Jackson said with a laugh.

“I know. It’s shocking.”

“Must come from Deanna’s side of the family because you and I can barely build anything with LEGOs,” Jackson said.

Brooklyn laughed. “It’s true. His model that shows how a tsunami wave forms and travels is really well done. He’s even made it so he can change the depth of the water to show how it changes wave height. And the model houses and stores he’s built to show what happens when the wave hits are incredibly detailed.”

“I’m so bummed I won’t get to see him present it on Saturday. Can you record it for me?”

“Of course. I was planning to anyway.” Brooklyn hesitated. “Jackson, I should tell you...”

“Tell me what?” His voice shifted, tension creeping in. “What is it? Is there something wrong with Liam?”

“He’s fine, honestly. But earlier today, there was an incident.”

“What kind of incident?” Jackson asked sharply.

Brooklyn explained what had happened, recounting the attempted abduction and the police’s theory about it being a gang initiation or a TikTok trend. “They said they’re on the lookout for the kids. If they find them, we can press charges. But Liam is fine—shaken up, but fine. He’s asleep now.”

Jackson let out a long breath. “That’s terrifying. I’ll be on the next flight?—”

“No, Jackson. You don’t need to do that,” Brooklyn protested. “Liam is fine. Nothing happened. You need to stay there. You said yourself you couldn’t pass up this opportunity.”

“How are you?”

“I’m okay,” she said, even though her hands still trembled. “I poured myself a big glass of wine, and I’m going to try to sleep. We just need to put this day behind us.”

“I’m so glad you were there to stop it.”

“Me too,” Brooklyn said quietly.

“Thanks, sis. I’m nineteen hours ahead here, so I’ll call Liam later tonight and tell him I love him. I’ll be home as soon as I can.”

“Will do,” Brooklyn said, ending the call.

She glanced at her phone, checking her calendar. Tomorrow was Thursday—just two clients in the morning, and then she’d be free. She decided she’d pick Liam up directly after school. They could finish his science project and treat themselves to something nice. They both needed a little pampering.

Brooklyn pulled up in front of Liam’s school. He hopped into the car with a grin.

“How does ice cream sound?” she asked.

“Most excellent!” he deadpanned.

When she finished laughing at his dude-bro accent, she asked, “How was school?”

“Not bad. Mr. Kumu let us work on our projects during science period.”

“That’s great! Are you all set up?”

“Almost, I put everything together. I just need to glue the last of the cars and houses in place.”

“I’m so proud of you, Liam. I think your project is amazing.”

“Thanks, Aunt Brooklyn. I enjoyed doing it.” Liam glanced down at his lap. “I just wish Dad could be here.”

“I know you do, honey. He wishes it as well,” Brooklyn said gently.

They pulled up to the ice cream stand, and Liam jumped out. Brooklyn rolled down her window. “Wait! You know what? Get me one too—chocolate.”

Liam grinned. “Sounds good!” He scampered off to stand in line.

Brooklyn watched him, marveling at how resilient kids were. Yesterday’s events still haunted her, but here was Liam, excited about ice cream and chatting about his science project. She glanced in her rearview mirror as a white van pulled into the parking lot.

Her heart stuttered. There must be more than one white Express Cargo van on the island, she told herself. “You’re just being paranoid.”

Still, she got out of the car and went to stand beside Liam in line.

“Hey,” he said, giving her a confused look. “I can handle it on my own.”

“I know,” she said with a forced smile. “I just thought it’d be nice to stand in the sunshine with you.”

He shrugged, ordering their ice creams as Brooklyn kept glancing over her shoulder. The van’s windows were tinted, and no one had gotten out. Her paranoia intensified.

Finally, they got their ice creams and headed back to the car. She put hers in a cup so she could eat it at home. The drive back was quick, Liam chattering happily about the mod his friends were playing. But Brooklyn’s eyes kept flicking to the rear view mirror.

When she saw a white van again, turning onto the next street over, sweat pebbled across her back.

It’s not the same van. You’re just being crazy , she told herself. But as they pulled into the driveway, she hit the garage opener and drove straight in, closing the door behind them.

“What’s with you?” Liam asked, giving her a quizzical look.

“Nothing,” she said quickly. “I just thought it’d be nice to put the car in the garage tonight. It’s supposed to be chilly tomorrow morning.”

“You’ve turned into a wimp since moving to Hawai’i,” he teased.

She smiled weakly. “Probably true. Anyway, thanks for the ice cream.”

Liam headed inside, but Brooklyn sat in the car, gripping the steering wheel. She didn’t call the cops—they wouldn’t believe her. But deep down, she was certain the

van had followed them. This wasn't just a prank. It felt...intentional. And she needed to figure out how to keep Liam safe.

One face came to mind, and she grimaced. Calling him was the last thing she wanted to do. Ever since that night, she'd avoided him. One night stands were never her thing, but it had felt right with him, it had felt...special. She had been lonely, plus she'd been pretty sure he would be worth it. And she was right. But then he hadn't called her and didn't respond when she'd broken down and called him.

Then when she'd bumped into him at Ohana's with another woman, he didn't even have the decency to look ashamed or embarrassed. She'd been mortified and pissed all at the same time. He'd treated her like they were passing acquaintances as if they hadn't spent hours having mind-blowing sex. He'd behaved as if he was doing nothing wrong. Technically, she'd had to finally admit to herself that he hadn't. Still, it had been a humiliating experience, one that she relived every single time she saw him. It was Nate all over again. The thought of reaching out made her feel ill.

But she could put those feelings aside for Liam. If something happened to him because of her pride, she'd never forgive herself.

Brooklyn sighed and pulled out her phone.

CHAPTER 3

Ethan wiped the sweat from his brow, the Hawaiian sun relentless even as it set as he guided Mojo through the obstacle course. The Belgian Malinois moved with powerful precision, muscles rippling under his sleek coat as he vaulted over hurdles and wove through the poles. Ethan couldn't help but feel a swell of pride—Mojo was a beast, and working with him was the kind of partnership Ethan thrived on.

They'd just returned from a high-stakes drug raid with local law enforcement, adrenaline still coursing through Ethan's veins. The bust had been a success, and while most people would be unwinding with a cold drink, Ethan found his release in the rhythmic training sessions with Mojo.

As Mojo cleared the final hurdle, Ethan broke into a grin. "Good boy, Mojo," he praised, crouching to give the dog a hearty rub behind the ears. Mojo's tail wagged furiously, his dark eyes shining with intelligence and loyalty. "You're the best."

Ethan took special joy in working with Mojo since he'd been in a car accident a little under six months ago. He'd ended up with a concussion he still grappled with. He'd been in the Special Forces for years and had had lots of concussions, more than anyone should, but one car accident, and he's still trying to recover.

He's just been a bit bruised, but the concussion caused him to lose about twenty-four hours of his life. Still today, he had zero memory of anything that happened during that period, but he considered himself damn lucky. A bad rainstorm mixed with a dark night and an elderly gentleman. He could have gone over the cliff so, all in all, a few headaches were minor to what it could have been.

The sound of an engine broke the tranquility. A car rolled up, kicking up a cloud of dust on the dirt road that led to the Brotherhood Protectors' compound. Ethan straightened, shielding his eyes against the glare of the sun. He recognized Brooklyn Alexander behind the wheel of the vehicle. He hadn't seen her outside of Ohana's Bar, where she'd brushed off his attempts at polite conversation with a sharp tongue and an expression that screamed "not interested."

Ethan frowned as she stepped out of the car. What the hell was she doing here? She'd made it pretty clear she didn't like him. The tension radiating from her now was impossible to ignore. She looked frantic, her blond ponytail askew, her blue eyes darting around before locking on him. Her lips pressed into a firm line as she strode toward him with quick, purposeful steps.

"Ethan," she said, her voice tight and clipped. "I need to talk to you."

Mojo approached her and she automatically rubbed directly behind his right ear, just the way he liked. Ethan was shocked but didn't want to show it. Mojo never went to strangers, and most people didn't know that since Mojo had lost the tip of his right ear during an op, he liked to be rubbed behind it, not scratched.

Ethan crossed his arms, his brow furrowing. "This is a surprise. Didn't think I was on your friend list."

Her jaw tightened. "You're not. But I don't have a choice."

His head snapped up. If Brooklyn Alexander was coming to him, something was seriously wrong. He tipped his chin toward the shade of a nearby tree. "Let's talk."

She hesitated, her hands fidgeting as her eyes swept the area again. Finally, she followed, her posture stiff and defensive. Mojo trailed behind them, his alert gaze flicking between them as if sensing the undercurrent of tension.

Brooklyn stopped a few feet away, crossing her arms over her chest like she needed the barrier. “It’s Liam.

Ethan’s chest tightened. Liam. She’d mentioned him once in passing at the bar, and Ethan had assumed the kid was her son. His gut churned. When someone brought up kids it always made him wary. “Your son is having a problem?”

Her eyes narrowed as if her temper had flared. “He’s my nephew, not my son.”

The correction hit like a slap, but Ethan didn’t let that show either. She was full of surprises today. He nodded, forcing himself to focus. “Okay. What happened?”

Brooklyn blew out a sharp breath, her arms dropping to her sides. “Yesterday a couple of guys tried to pull Liam into a van.”

“They tried to kidnap him?”

She shrugged. “The cops said there are some teenagers going around grabbing kids, putting them in the back of a van, driving around for five minutes, and then dropping them off again. Some sort of initiation into a new gang or a TikTok trend or something. But I think it’s more than that.”

Brooklyn’s voice was tight and clipped.

Ethan studied her closely, noting the way her hands trembled before she shoved them deep into her pockets, as though trying to hide her fear.

“Explain.” Ethan kept his voice calm and measured. “Why do you think it’s more?”

“Today, we went for ice cream after school. The van—the one the kids tried to pull Liam into—I’m sure I saw it at the ice cream stand.” Her voice broke slightly, and

she swallowed hard before continuing. “The windows were tinted, and I couldn’t see inside. But nobody got out of the van when it pulled in.” She hesitated, her brow furrowed. “I know there’s more than one white Chevy Express Cargo van on the Big Island, but...”

Ethan frowned, leaning closer. “But your gut is telling you it was the same one.”

She nodded, her shoulders stiff with tension. “Yes. And then, when I pulled onto our street, I saw the white van turn onto the next street over.”

“You think they followed you home?” Ethan asked, trying to keep the concern out of his voice.

She nodded again, her movements sharp and jerky, like she was barely holding it together. “Look, I know it’s a lot to ask, but can you just check?”

Ethan exhaled slowly. “Check what?”

“I don’t know!” Brooklyn’s voice cracked as she threw her hands in the air. “You work for the Brotherhood Protectors. Isn’t this the shit that you guys do? Check the van. Check something. Find out if this is real or if it really was just some sort of prank.” Her arms wrapped around her midsection, as though trying to physically hold herself together. “How could this be a prank? How could teenagers go around throwing kids in the back of a van and it’s okay? It’s not a prank. I don’t care what the cops said.”

Ethan watched her for a moment, taking in the raw fear in her eyes. “Yeah,” he said finally. “It doesn’t sound like much of a prank. And if that’s what’s going on, it needs to stop—ASAP.” He paused, his voice softening. “Okay. You’re scared, and you need some help. Where’s Liam now?”

“Mrs. Forbes, who lives next door, invited him over to play with Archie, their corgi.” Brooklyn’s words rushed out. “She’s feeding him milk and cookies, which means he’s never going to eat the dinner I put in front of him after ice cream and milk and cookies. But still, I felt like it was safe to leave him there with her and Mr. Forbes while I came to find you. But, they’re elderly and I don’t want to leave him long, even though Mr. Forbes is a former Marine.”

Ethan nodded. “I see.”

“I tried to call,” Brooklyn said, her tone laced with quiet accusation.

“Yeah, sorry,” Ethan said, running a hand through his hair. She had his number? He didn’t recall giving it to her. He shook his head. “I just got back from working on a drug bust with the police. I haven’t been checking my calls.” He’d have to ask around and see who gave this woman his digits, not that it mattered, it was just a bit odd.

Brooklyn nodded, but tension ran along her shoulders. Her gaze softened as it landed on Mojo who was sitting beside her as if to comfort her. “He’s a beautiful dog.” She rubbed behind his ear again.

“Yeah, he is,” Ethan said. The whole Mojo thing unbalanced him. He gave himself a mental shake. “Okay, listen. I’ll come over to your place and check things out. I’ll set up some video cameras too. How about that? Will that help?”

Some of the tension left Brooklyn’s shoulders, her relief palpable. “That would be great. I’ll pay you for your time and for the equipment.”

Ethan waved her off. “You’re scared; I get that. Let’s take care of this.” He stood and gave her a reassuring nod. “Let me feed Mojo and get organized. I’ll grab the equipment and be over tonight, okay?”

Brooklyn gave him a weak but grateful smile. “Yes, that would be great. I guess I owe you one. Thank you.”

“You don’t owe me anything,” Ethan said firmly. “I don’t know what’s really going on, but it sounds like there’s a problem. And I’m of the school that believes you should always trust your gut. If your instincts tell you there’s more to this, then we need to take care of it. Airdrop me your address, then head home. I’ll be over in a bit.”

She fiddled with her phone a bit, then his pinged with the incoming pin. With a nod, she moved toward her car, her movements less stiff. The view from the back was just as good as the one from the front. She filled out her jeans nicely and the sway of her hips made him long to touch them. Maybe someday. He was still staring after her as she roared down the driveway, gravel spitting up behind her tires.

Ethan stood there for a moment, watching her taillights disappear. He couldn’t imagine living with the fear that something might happen to a child you loved. The whole incident yesterday sounded like a nightmare, and he couldn’t blame Brooklyn for being rattled. What surprised him was that she’d come to him for help. Surely she had other people she could have turned to. Obviously, she knew where he worked so that must be it.

Still, he wasn’t upset about it. He was glad she’d come to him. He’d had his eye on Brooklyn for a while now, though she seemed oblivious to his interest. Maybe he was making more progress with her than he thought.

He rubbed the back of his head, grimacing as a familiar dull ache pulsed behind his eyes. The headaches continued to plague him. The concussion he’d suffered was a frustrating reminder that sometimes, the little things—like getting clipped by a distracted driver—could do more damage than the bigger, more dangerous events he’d faced in the special forces.

Shaking his head, Ethan stretched and rolled his neck, trying to ease the tension. He'd take some aspirin and get on with it. Brooklyn needed his help, and he wasn't about to let her down. The fact that she trusted him enough to come to him meant more than he could say.

And maybe—just maybe—this was his chance to prove he was the kind of man she could rely on.

Ethan pulled out his phone, his gaze flicking between the dust Brooklyn had kicked up when she left and Mojo sitting next to him. His thumb hovered over Bellamy Chance's contact for a moment before he pressed the call button. The line rang twice before Bellamy picked up, his voice crisp and alert.

"Ethan," Bellamy said, a touch of curiosity in his tone. "How did today go? I heard you and Mojo kicked some serious ass. Coop and Nova said you guys were on fire, finding that drug stash hidden in the garden."

Ethan smiled down at his dog. "Yeah, Mojo was awesome. It was a good result, and I enjoyed working with Nova. Nothing like helping the DEA even if we only got called because she's dating Coop."

Bellamy chuckled. "We'll take whatever jobs we can get, however we can get them. What's going on? You up for a visit to Ohana's tonight?"

"I can't go tonight. I've got a kind of job I have to do," Ethan said.

"OK, well, if you need anything, don't hesitate. We're all here to help," Bellamy replied.

Ethan paused. "Actually, I could use some help."

“Really? What kind of job? This doesn’t sound like a normal thing.” The lift in the man’s voice told Ethan that Bellamy’s curiosity was piqued.

“You remember Brooklyn, from Ohana’s?” Ethan asked.

Bellamy laughed. “Yeah, I remember Brooklyn. The woman you have a real thing for.”

“I wouldn’t call it a real thing, but... yeah.” Ethan shifted uncomfortably. “She’s having some issues.”

“What kind of issues?” Bellamy’s tone turned serious.

Ethan explained the situation with Liam and the van, detailing Brooklyn’s fears and her belief that the van had followed her home.

“She’s freaked out,” Ethan said. “And honestly, I believe her.”

Bellamy nodded. “Yeah, I’d believe her too. You want some help setting up security?”

“Nah, I just need to grab the equipment,” Ethan said. “Do you think Hawk will mind? I mean it’s his ranch and his equipment.” Jace Hawkins was also his boss, and he didn’t want to do anything to piss the man off.

“Not at all,” Bellamy replied. “You know he wouldn’t want to leave any woman in trouble. Go over there and fix it. Call me if you need anything. I’m happy to help.”

“Thanks,” Ethan said, heading toward his pickup. “Keep a beer cold for me in case I make it back tonight.”

“Have you ever known me to not have cold beer?” Bellamy said with a chuckle as Ethan hung up.

About thirty minutes later, Ethan pulled into the Brotherhood Protector Ranch’s command center. He’d gone home for a quick shower and fresh jeans and a t-shirt. Showing up to Brooklyn’s all sweaty wasn’t a good look. He hopped out of his truck and walked inside, the cool air of the room a welcome reprieve. Rusty Callahan stood in the middle of the space, arms crossed over his chest.

“What’s up?” Rusty asked.

“Not much, man,” Ethan replied.

“I heard you and Mojo were MVPs today.

Ethan grinned. “Yeah, thanks. Mojo was spot on.”

“Good stuff,” Rusty said as he rested his butt on one of the tables. “I also heard you’re going to help Brooklyn Alexander with a problem.”

“Yeah, she’s a little freaked out.”

Rusty’s jaw tightened. “I don’t blame her one bit. I don’t know what the hell is wrong with kids today. Who does that kind of shit and calls it fun?”

When had they started sounding like old geezers? “I hear you. It’s crazy as hell,” Ethan agreed. “I’m just grabbing the equipment Bellamy pulled together for me.”

Rusty nodded toward the table. “It’s all there.”

“Awesome,” Ethan said, walking over to check the setup. Rusty joined him, looking

over the items.

“Think that’s enough?” Rusty asked.

“Yeah, this should do it,” Ethan replied.

“Well, like we said, yell if you need help,” Rusty said.

“Will do,” Ethan replied as he gathered the gear and carried it to his truck. He loaded the equipment into the back, climbed in, and started the drive toward Brooklyn’s house.

On the way, Ethan considered grabbing some food to take to her and Liam but thought better of it. Brooklyn hadn’t seemed particularly thrilled to ask for his help in the first place, and he didn’t want to overstep. Slow and steady—that was the approach he needed to take with her.

As he rolled into Brooklyn’s driveway, he took a moment to appreciate her house. It was a small, well-kept bungalow, painted in a muted teal with white trim. A sloping metal roof added a touch of rustic island charm, and he knew it would help with the wild rainstorms that they had. The front yard was modest but well-tended, with a lush hedge of hibiscus flowers framing the walkway. A few coconut palms swayed in the front yard casting shadows over the front porch.

The porch was wide and inviting, with a couple of rocking chairs and a small table with a pot of brightly colored plants. He wasn’t sure what kind. Wind chimes made of bamboo and shells hung from the eaves which added a nice homey feel.

It seemed like the kind of place Brooklyn would create—a reflection of her warmth and practicality. Not that he’d felt that warm personality directed toward him, but he’d seen it with others. Ethan took a deep breath and got out of his truck. Slow and

steady he reminded himself. Slow and steady.

CHAPTER 4

As Ethan walked up onto the porch, the front door opened.

“Hey, Ethan, Mojo,” Brooklyn said, her voice soft but tired. She’d changed her top. Now she was wearing a white tank with a wide-neck navy sweater that fell off one shoulder. Even stressed and scared, she was gorgeous. He had to fight the urge to wrap his arms around her. Her eyes dropped to the gear in his hands. “I see you brought all the stuff.”

“Yep,” Ethan replied with a small smile. “Good to go.”

Brooklyn stepped back, letting Ethan and Mojo enter. Mojo went over to Brooklyn for more ear rubs while Ethan glanced around the space. It wasn’t what he’d expected. The bungalow had a cozy, lived-in feel—practical and warm. Sunlight poured through the large windows, highlighting polished bamboo floors that gleamed under his boots. The muted seafoam-green walls reminded him of calm ocean waters after a storm.

The living room was simple but inviting. A wicker sofa with cream-colored cushions sat against one wall, anchored by a low driftwood coffee table in front of it. Vibrant throw pillows, covered in patterns of ferns and hibiscus, added splashes of tropical color. A couple of rattan armchairs flanked the sofa, their frames worn smooth by use. The whole setup was neat and functional. Yet it didn’t feel sterile—more like someone had carefully pieced it together to create comfort, not impress anyone.

“So,” Brooklyn commented while she studied him, “is there anything you need from

me?”

She was bringing his attention back to the reason he was there. No small talk for her. Ethan reset his expectations and congratulated himself on making the right decision about the food. Brooklyn would not have liked that one bit.

“I need a ladder to do the outside cameras. I will install two that will cover your whole front yard. I notice you already have a video doorbell. That’s good. I will tie that into the camera system and the whole thing will be monitored at the Brotherhood Protector comms center.”

“I—I don’t know if I can afford the monitoring.” Brooklyn bit her lip. “I will pay you for the cameras though.”

“You don’t have to pay for anything. It’s on the house and so is the monitoring. We’re not going to leave you out here with no backup.”

She looked like she was about to argue but she finally just nodded curtly. If he had to guess, he would say that she gave in only because it was her nephew. If it had been just for her, she would have argued with him.

Footsteps approaching from the hallway made him look left. A young boy of about twelve appeared around the corner. He was tall and lanky with shaggy brown hair and bright blue eyes. Ethan could see a family resemblance around the eyes between the kid and Brooklyn.

He put down the box and immediately offered his hand. “You must be Liam,” he said.

Liam stepped forward and shook Ethan’s hand. “Yes sir. It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Foster. Thank you for doing this.”

Ethan smiled. “Please call me Ethan, and it’s not a problem at all.” He pointed to his dog. “This is Mojo.”

Liam started to reach out and then quickly asked, “May I pet him?”

“Yes, he’d like that.”

Liam immediately went down on his knees and petted the dog. Mojo stood still and let the boy ruffle his fur.

Brooklyn reached out and touched Liam’s shoulder. “Why don’t you go finish up your homework and then you can help Mr. Foster put up the cameras.” She glanced at Ethan. “If that is okay. Liam is into electronics.”

Liam looked up at him with bright eyes. “Can I?”

“I never turn down help,” Ethan agreed.

Liam turned on his heel and disappeared back down the hallway.

“Thank you for that,” Brooklyn said.

“Not a problem. If he helps me put the cameras in place, it will help him feel better about the whole incident. He’ll feel more in control.

Brooklyn looked surprised that Ethan understood why she wanted Liam to help but she didn’t say anything. Instead, she just raised an eyebrow as if to ask if there was a reason he was still standing there.

“Do you want cameras on the inside of the house?”

“Ah...I...didn’t think about that. Do I need cameras on the inside?”

“If it’s alright with you, I’ll take a look around first and then answer that question. Okay?”

Brooklyn considered it for a moment and then said, “I guess so.”

Ethan toed off his boots. “You lead the way.” He signaled to Mojo to lie down and stay.

Brooklyn took him to the kitchen first. It wasn’t big, but it didn’t need to be. White cabinets lined the walls, and the countertops were a pale gray stone that seemed practical for wear and tear. The backsplash caught his eye—a mosaic of blues and greens that shimmered like the ocean under sunlight. Open shelves displayed plates, bowls, and a few mismatched mugs. A small breakfast bar with two stools was tucked against one side, the wood lightly scuffed from daily use. On the counter sat a bowl of fruit—pineapples, mangos, and something he couldn’t identify. It felt... domestic.

“Does that door lead to the garage?” he asked. He wanted to comment on how she’d turned this little house into a home in a much better way than he had managed since he’d moved to the island. He was a bit jealous. His two sisters were good at that type of thing too, but that skill had missed him completely.

“Yes, it does. I usually don’t bother to park in there, but under the circumstances, it seemed...prudent.”

“Wise move,” he commented as he crossed the kitchen and opened the door. It was a standard garage. Neat and tidy, like the rest of the home with lawn chairs and tools hanging on hooks on the walls and her small SUV in the garage. He noted a large ladder resting against the front wall, then closed the door. “Let’s see the rest of the house.”

She moved over to the dining area. A round wooden table with four chairs sat under a simple pendant light. A small vase of flowers—some kind of bloom that smelled good—added a touch of color. The table looked like it had seen a lot of use. Scratches in the wood and faded rings from coffee cups spoke of everyday life.

A set of patio doors led to the backyard. Ethan opened them and stepped out to the back deck. The yard itself was quite large. It appeared neat and well cared for, with a few bushes and palm trees. He was pleased to see it was fenced.

He turned to Brooklyn. “I’m going to put a couple of cameras here and here.” He pointed to the corner of the house and a tree on the right. “Those will cover the whole yard. I’m also going to put one in that back corner that will keep an eye on the yards around you. None of those are fenced so it makes for an easier approach for anyone not wanting to be seen.”

Brooklyn rubbed her forehead. “I’m not sure my neighbors will like that.”

“They won’t even notice. I have a camera that looks like a birdhouse.”

She grinned. “That’s sneaky.”

She looked amazing when she smiled. It was the kind of smile that hit him in the solar plexus and knocked the wind out of him. Ethan grinned back. “Yeah, but it works beautifully.”

Heading back inside, they did a quick tour of the rest of the house. Three bedrooms, one which she obviously used as an office, and a bathroom. They returned to the front door.

As he stepped back into the main living area, Ethan’s eyes caught on the details again. This house was practical, but it wasn’t cold. It felt cared for. It fit Brooklyn

perfectly—no-nonsense, but with a softness she probably didn't even realize she had.

“There are a couple of spots I can install cameras on the inside if you want but if you're not comfortable with it, then I think we can manage with just the outside.”

She exhaled audibly. “That's good. The idea of putting cameras inside my home is just...”

“Invasive,” he supplied.

“Yes. That's a good word for it.”

“Okay then. He quickly stepped into his boots and picked up his box. “If you'll just open the garage, I'll get the ladder and get started. Send Liam out when he's ready.”

“I will,” Brooklyn confirmed and then opened the door for him.

Mojo followed Ethan back to the porch and waited while Ethan glanced around once more, mentally mapping out the best places to install the cameras in the front yard again. She'd want coverage of the front and back doors, but he'd add a couple more in blind spots she might not have thought about. He wasn't taking any chances. This house might feel secure, but safety wasn't a guarantee. Her smiling face floated up to the front of his brain.

And right now, keeping her safe was all he cared about.

CHAPTER 5

Brooklyn glanced out the window to the front yard for the umpteenth time. Liam was helping Ethan put up the cameras, and Mojo lay at Liam's feet. It had to be the last one by the look of things. They'd already finished the back yard, and Liam was holding a flashlight, although Brooklyn was pretty sure it wasn't necessary. She had plenty of lights on outside and Ethan could probably see well enough without Liam's help.

Her heart swelled a bit at the sight. Ethan understood what she was trying to do for Liam without her having to say a word. He got it. Liam needed to feel safe again and he needed to feel in control. He'd fallen asleep with no problem last night, but a nightmare had woken him in the middle of the night. The hope was that helping Ethan put up the cameras would make him feel safer and in control.

Ethan said something and Liam laughed. If he hadn't been such a dick to her since their one night together, she would be falling in love with this man. The way he treated Liam showed her once again why she'd been so attracted to him in the first place, and why she'd broken her own rule about one-night stands. It didn't hurt that he was seriously sexy in his ass-hugging, faded jeans and black t-shirt. The sight of him made her remember their night together and her lady parts began to tingle.

She quickly reminded herself what a jerk he'd been to her. It was hard. He had a warm smile and a great sense of humor. When she saw him with his friends and other women at Ohana's, it hurt. Truth be told she was jealous. She knew what it was like to be on the receiving end of that smile and warmth, and she craved it again.

But keeping her distance was key to avoid getting hurt again, and she maintained a coldness when he was around to protect herself. It wasn't like he had time for her anyway. That wasn't strictly true. He had all the time in the world for her if she pretended they hadn't slept together like he seemed to be doing. He treated her as if he hadn't rocked her world. As if they hadn't spent hours in bed. He treated her like a stranger that he was interested in, not a former lover. It was almost as if he had no memory of them being together. She half-heartedly wished she could forget.

She frowned. It didn't matter how he treated her, though, because he was doing this for her and treating Liam as the kind and decent kid he was. She appreciated that more than she could say. She owed this man and as much as it pissed her off to admit it, she was grateful for his help. Glancing at the clock, she swore. It was Liam's bedtime. She hated to break up his fun because he really did seem to be enjoying himself, but she also knew he was exhausted.

She slipped on her sneakers and went outside. "Hey guys, how's it going?"

"We just finished." Ethan climbed down the ladder and met her gaze with his deep green eyes. Her heart thumped. He ruffled Liam's hair. "Liam is a great assistant."

"Glad to hear it." She smiled at her nephew as she tried to calm her racing heart. "It's time for bed, hon. Go on in and get ready." She braced herself for a fight, but he just nodded.

"Thanks for letting me help, Ethan. I learned a lot." Liam offered his hand.

"Thanks for assisting me. You're a quick study." Ethan shook hands with the boy.

Liam ruffled Mojo's fur. "It was good to meet you too, boy. I hope I get to see you again." He stood and headed toward the door. "Ethan said I could come by the Brotherhood Protector ranch and see Mojo in action. Can we go?"

Brooklyn wanted to say no. That after this, she had no intension of being anywhere near Ethan again. But the look on Liam's face was so hopeful. "Sure. We'll drop by sometime." Maybe if she was vague, Liam would forget. It was doubtful, but she could dream.

Liam waved at Ethan again. "Goodnight." Then disappeared inside the house.

Ethan gathered up his tools and put them back in the box. "You know, I wouldn't mind having Liam come over to the Brotherhood Protector base and check out the comms center. We could teach him a lot—he seems like an interesting kid."

The last thing Brooklyn wanted was for Ethan to start teaching Liam anything. She couldn't take being around this man more than absolutely necessary. He kept her too off balance and she liked that way too much for comfort. She forced a polite smile and said noncommittally, "Maybe."

Ethan nodded, picked up the ladder, and walked back into the garage. When he returned a moment later, he paused, his expression shifting. He glanced left, then right, before walking back over to her.

"What is it?" Brooklyn asked, her stomach tightening at his sudden change in demeanor.

"There's a van parked down the street," Ethan said quietly. "It wasn't there five minutes ago."

Her pulse quickened. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to put all my stuff back in my truck." Ethan's tone was calm but firm. "Then I'll see if I can find out who these people are."

Brooklyn stared at him, her heart thudding. “Don’t look,” Ethan added.

Of course, that made her want to look even more. Against her better judgment, she stole a quick glance in the direction he’d indicated, trying to act nonchalant. Her stomach dropped—he was right. The white van was parked halfway down the block, its windows dark and uninviting. She forced herself to look away, continuing to talk to Ethan as if she hadn’t seen anything.

A moment later, her neighbors, the Forbes, turned into their driveway. Mrs. Forbes stepped out of the car and came over, her expression concerned. “Brooklyn, how are you, dear?”

“I’m fine, Mrs. Forbes,” Brooklyn replied, her voice steadier than she felt.

Mr. Forbes joined them, cutting across the grass. “Brooklyn, how’s Liam? I can’t believe what happened—it’s just horrifying.”

“Yes, Mr. Forbes, it is. Liam’s fine, thank you,” she said, forcing a smile. Then, lowering her voice, she added, “Actually, would you mind doing me a favor? Liam’s already in bed, but would you go in and keep an eye on him for a bit? I need to take a quick drive around the neighborhood with Mr. Foster here, just to check on a few things.”

Mrs. Forbes tilted her head. “You just finished installing the cameras, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” Brooklyn said, nodding quickly. “Everything’s set up, but this will just give me some peace of mind.”

Mr. Forbes gave a reassuring nod. “Of course. Take your time. We’ll keep an eye on him.” They walked up onto the porch.

“Mojo, you go with them. You stay here,” Ethan said and followed the couple up onto the porch and into the house. “Go find Liam. Stay with Liam,” Ethan directed.

Brooklyn had never felt so grateful in all her life. The Forbes were lovely, like a set of grandparents to Liam, but they weren’t much protection. She was determined to go after the men in the van and having Mojo stay with Liam made her feel a damn sight better. She opened the door to Liam’s room and the dog trotted inside. He jumped on the bed and curled into a ball at the bottom. Liam was already sound asleep.

Brooklyn hustled back out to the front room. “We won’t be long.” She gave the Forbes a wave and then hit the porch. Ethan was already walking toward the pickup. They were trying to be casual but they must have given themselves away because the van’s engine roared to life, its headlights cutting through the dark as it began to pull away from the curb. Brooklyn’s breath caught in her throat, her heart slamming against her ribs.

“They’re leaving!” she gasped.

Ethan didn’t hesitate. They sprinted across the driveway to his truck. Brooklyn fumbled with the door handle before throwing herself into the passenger seat. Ethan climbed in on the driver’s side and fired up the engine. The truck rumbled to life and he slammed it into gear.

“They’re getting away!” Brooklyn’s voice was sharp and urgent. Fear churned in her stomach, the memory of those men grabbing Liam still fresh in her mind.

“They’re not getting away,” Ethan replied evenly, steering the truck onto the street. The van turned a corner up ahead, taillights glowing faintly. Ethan pressed the gas, the truck surged forward.

The quiet streets of the neighborhood blurred past them as the chase began. The van

took a sharp left at the next intersection, its tires squealing, and Ethan stayed close behind. Brooklyn gripped the dashboard, her pulse racing as she glanced nervously out the window.

“They know we’re following them,” she said, her voice tight.

“Good,” Ethan muttered, his eyes locked on the road. “Let them know.”

The van sped up, weaving through the residential streets, blowing through stop signs, and skimming dangerously close to parked cars. Ethan handled the truck with practiced precision, navigating the narrow roads with ease. Brooklyn clenched her fists, her nails digging into her palms as she fought a rising tide of panic.

“They’re trying to lose us!” she shouted, her voice cracking with a mix of fear and frustration.

“I see that,” Ethan replied calmly, his grip on the wheel steady.

The van suddenly veered onto a main road, tires screeching and the cab wobbling sideways a little as it merged into traffic. Ethan followed, his engine roaring as he accelerated to keep pace. Horns blared and brake lights flared as cars swerved to avoid the van’s erratic maneuvers. Brooklyn’s heart pounded as she held onto the door, the chaotic scene unfolding like a nightmare.

“Ethan!” she yelled as a sedan slammed on its brakes directly in their path.

“Got it,” Ethan snapped, swerving smoothly to avoid the car. The truck lurched slightly before straightening out, his focus never wavered from his quarry.

The van darted between lanes, cutting off other drivers and creating a trail of chaos. Ethan stayed close; his jaw tight as he pushed the truck harder. Brooklyn leaned

forward, her eyes glued to the white van as it dodged through traffic.

“There!” she shouted, pointing as the van made a sudden turn onto a side street.

Ethan swung the truck into the turn, the tires skidding briefly before regaining traction. But when they rounded the corner, the van was gone. The street was dark and empty, save for a few parked cars and an alleyway shrouded in shadows.

“Dammit!” Brooklyn cried, slamming her hand against the dashboard. “Where are they? They were just here!”

Ethan slowed the truck, scanning the area with narrowed eyes. His movements were deliberate, controlled, as if he hadn’t just lost the van entirely. Brooklyn, however, felt her frustration boil over.

“You lost them!” she yelled, her voice trembling with anger and fear. “How could you lose them? They were right there!”

Ethan pulled the truck to the curb and killed the engine, turning to face her. His expression was calm but firm, his tone unyielding. “They’re gone, Brooklyn. I wasn’t about to keep chasing them blindly through unknown streets. That’s not how we do this.”

Brooklyn glared at him, her chest heaving. “You’re just going to give up? What about Liam? What about the fact that those men tried to take him? They could come back, Ethan!”

“I know,” he said, his voice steady. “And we’ll find them another way. But a reckless car chase isn’t the answer.”

Tears of frustration pricked at her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. She turned

away, staring out the window as her emotions churned. Every fiber of her being screamed that they should keep going, but Ethan didn't budge. The silence in the truck was thick and heavy with unspoken words.

Ethan restarted the engine and turned the truck around. The ride back to her neighborhood was tense, the only sound the hum of the engine and the faint roar of distant traffic. When they finally pulled into her driveway, Brooklyn threw open the door and got out, slamming it behind her.

"I know you're angry," Ethan said as he grabbed his gear from the back seat. "But we'll figure this out. You're not alone in this."

Brooklyn didn't answer. She stalked toward the house, her shoulders tight with anger and fear. Inside, she knew Liam was safe. But as she reached the door, she couldn't shake the image of the van, its dark windows hiding God knows what, and the men inside who might still be watching.

CHAPTER 6

Tension hung heavy in the air as Ethan followed Brooklyn into the house.

“How was it, dear?” Mrs. Forbes asked as she rose from the sofa, her warm smile genuine despite the late hour. “Did you manage to take care of everything?”

Brooklyn cleared her throat but her voice remained tight. “Yes, it was fine. I can’t thank you enough for helping me out these past few days.”

Mr. Forbes stood, his movements slow and deliberate, the shuffle of an elderly man with limited mobility. “It’s been our pleasure, dear. You know we think of you as a daughter, and Liam is such a treat.”

Brooklyn’s lip trembled slightly, and Ethan stepped closer, searching for something to say to ease the pressure building in her. He could see how much she was struggling to hold herself together. “I hope Mojo behaved himself,” he offered.

“What a fine animal!” Mr. Forbes said, glancing around the room. “He was just here a moment ago. Must have wandered back to Liam’s room.”

“Yes, he’s a good dog,” Ethan agreed. “I’ll just go fetch him. It was nice meeting you both.” He shook hands with Mr. Forbes and nodded politely to Mrs. Forbes before heading down the hallway.

Ethan quickly checked the other bedrooms and bathroom, finally poking his head into Liam’s room. Mojo was curled up on the foot of the bed, his ears twitching slightly.

Ethan gave a low whistle, and the dog perked up, obediently hopping off the bed to follow him.

When Ethan returned to the living area, Brooklyn turned from locking the front door, her expression hesitant. “I want to apologize for yelling earlier. It was unfair. I was upset, but that’s no excuse.”

Ethan waved her off. “You’re under a lot of pressure, and you’re scared. I’ve been yelled at before—it’s nothing I can’t handle.”

“Still,” she said, her voice quieter, “I owe you an apology. You’re helping me, and I should have treated you with more respect.”

“Brooklyn,” Ethan said, leaning casually against the back of the couch, “you don’t need to apologize. It’s all good. The bigger question is, do you feel safe here?”

She hesitated, her gaze darting around the room. “I... you just put up the cameras, so it should be fine... right?”

“Do you feel safe here?” he repeated, his tone firmer. “Cameras or not, if you don’t feel safe, you won’t sleep, and Liam will pick up on your stress.”

She frowned, chewing her bottom lip. “Where else would we go? To a hotel? I doubt I’d feel safer there. Jackson decided to redo his floors while he’s away so we can’t stay there either.” Her explanation sounded rushed and defensive.

Ethan crossed his arms, watching her carefully. She didn’t feel safe. He could see it in the set of her shoulders, high and tense. Her fingers fidgeted at her sides. He couldn’t leave her like this—it wasn’t in him to walk away when she and Liam were vulnerable.

“I can move you both to the Brotherhood Protectors’ ranch,” he suggested. “They have secure cabins you could stay in until this is sorted.”

Brooklyn’s eyes met his, and for a moment, he saw the appeal of the idea flicker in her expression. But she shook her head. “No. I appreciate it, but I think that would upset Liam even more. With his father gone and the science fair coming up, it’s better to keep him in familiar surroundings.”

Ethan’s jaw tightened. She was scared, and that didn’t sit right with him. He had another idea, though he doubted she’d like it. “I’ll sleep on your sofa tonight. Mojo can stay in Liam’s room.”

Her lips parted in surprise. “I?—”

“I won’t interfere,” he said quickly. “I’ll just be here, in case anything happens. To be clear, I doubt they’ll come back tonight, but I can’t guarantee it. All I can promise is to protect you both.”

Brooklyn hugged herself, visibly battling some internal war. He could tell she wanted to agree but couldn’t bring herself to say it.

“I’ll leave before Liam wakes up,” Ethan added gently, “so you won’t have to explain anything to him.”

She hesitated a moment longer before nodding, letting out a sigh that seemed to release some of the tension coiled in her. “I guess that would work.” Her tone was resigned, but her shoulders relaxed slightly. It was a small victory.

“Let me take Mojo out, and I’ll check the property,” Ethan said. “It’ll take ten minutes, tops. Then we’ll be good for the night.”

“You don’t have to sleep on the sofa,” Brooklyn murmured, her voice soft. For a second, Ethan thought she might be offering him her bed, but she continued, “There’s a spare room.”

He shook his head. “The sofa’s better. It puts me between all the entry points and you two. Mojo will stay with Liam, and as long as you keep your door open, we’ll both hear if anything happens.”

“Fine,” she said brusquely, her tone shifting to business-like efficiency. “That works.”

Ethan nodded, signaling to Mojo, and the two stepped outside. As Mojo sniffed around, Ethan grabbed a couple of weapons from his truck, checking the property with a sharp eye. Satisfied that everything was secure, he called the comms center to confirm the cameras were operational.

A few minutes later, he returned inside. “We’re good to go,”

Brooklyn gave him a weak smile. “Thanks for doing this.” She stood next to the sofa, which she’d already made up with a sheet, a pillow, and a blanket.

“I want you both to be safe, Brooklyn. We will get to the bottom of this.”

She nodded and turned away but not before her eyes started filling with tears. “I’m just going to make myself a cup of tea. Do you want some?”

“Sure.”

“I have cranberry, mango, chamomile...I think I have more, but I can’t seem to find them.” She rummaged through the cupboard next to the fridge.

“I’ll have whatever you’re having.” He leaned on the counter and waited.

She cleared her throat but kept her back to him and bustled around the kitchen. Finally, she stood in front of the kettle on the stove as if willing it to boil. The sound of a muffled sob reached him and that was all he needed. He went over and wrapped his arms around her from behind. “It’s going to be okay. I promise.” He knew it was stupid to promise anything. Too many years in the Special Forces had taught him that, but he couldn’t deal with Brooklyn crying. The situation was terrifying, and he needed her to know she wasn’t alone in this.

“I...” her voice broke as she turned and rested her head on his chest. He held her tightly as she cried softly, wetting his shirt. She clung to him in a way that hurt his heart but it was also...familiar somehow... As if he’d done this before. And it felt good. Right. As if this was where he was supposed to be. He hadn’t felt like that in a long, long time.

“I’ve got you. We’re not going to let anything happen to Liam. We will get to the bottom of this.” He squeezed her tighter. He breathed in her scent. Vanilla. A small pang of disappointment hit him. The woman in his dreams wore something citrusy. He gave himself a mental shake. Brooklyn was real and she was in his arms. Nothing was better than that. Certainly not some dream that haunted him. The citrus smell was probably his laundry detergent.

Brooklyn sniffed and lifted her head. “I’m sorry I made your t-shirt wet.”

“Not a problem. I know this is hard and incredibly stressful, but hang in there. Liam needs you to be strong. You cry on me whenever you like, okay? I’m right here with you.”

She nodded as her gaze locked with his. A jolt of electricity ran straight through to his cock. Damn, he wanted her so badly it hurt. He leaned down to kiss her, his lips

barely brushing hers. She froze for a second and then started to respond. Her soft lips brushed his and then deepened the kiss. Ethan squeezed his arms around her, and she melted against his torso. The piercing scream of the kettle made them jump, and she quickly turned away, avoiding looking at him.

“Here’s your tea.” She gestured to the mug on the counter. “Thanks for staying,” she said and then turned and disappeared down the hallway.

It was still dark when Ethan sat up, yawned, and stretched. It had taken him a long time to drift off after what happened in the kitchen. His body ached to hold Brooklyn. She fit him perfectly, but he felt guilty. This was not the time to make a pass at her. She was in a vulnerable state, and he didn’t want her to think he was trying to take advantage. If only she didn’t feel so damn good. If only this all didn’t seem so damn familiar. His mind flicked once again to the woman who haunted his dreams.

Ever since the accident, this mystery woman visited his dreams. He couldn’t make out her face or her voice, but he felt her next to him. Her soft touch on his skin. He wanted her like no one he’d ever wanted before, and in his dream, her long hair smelled like citrus and something wholly feminine. And...was there something about a tattoo or a birthmark? For some reason, that struck a chord within him. Something island shaped, maybe? But his memory was so faulty lately. Part of him hoped she was real. But the other part, the realistic part told him to let it go and deal with what was in front of him. Mooning over some ghost girl haunting his dreams was just plain stupid.

He sprang up, folded everything, and left it on the couch. Quietly, he used the bathroom, gave the house a quick once over, and then grabbed Mojo. They went out and got in his pickup. They drove around the block and found parking down the street. He’d agreed to leave before Liam woke but he wasn’t leaving them alone. The attempted kidnapping had happened during daylight hours so he would stay there until backup arrived. He wasn’t taking any chances.

The rumble of an engine caught his attention as Cooper Harris pulled up behind him. Coop strolled to the driver's window, his hands stuffed in his jacket pockets.

"Long night?" Cooper asked, leaning casually against the door.

"Not too bad," Ethan replied.

"So, what the hell do you think this really is?" Cooper asked, his tone more serious now. "If they came back to stake out the house, it's far more serious than I think any of us first thought."

"Agreed, and I have no idea. Not a freaking clue," Ethan admitted. "Teens taking kids for joyrides? No. It doesn't add up."

"I'm checking on that license plate, but it might be a while. Nova got a phone call early this morning and took off right after. She said she'd let me know when she got the info on the plate, but I'm not holding my breath. Whatever happened this morning that led to that call was serious." Cooper frowned. "I've asked Bellamy and Rusty to run the plate whenever one of them gets to the comms center, but it won't be until later today."

Ethan stifled another yawn. "Thanks."

Copper nodded. "You and Mojo head home. Get some breakfast, a shower, maybe even catch some shut-eye."

"Sounds good. Thanks for holding the fort."

"Don't mention it." Cooper clapped Ethan on the shoulder.

Ethan watched Coop return to his truck and then headed for home. He fed Mojo,

grabbed a quick shower, and caught a couple of hours of sleep. A few hours later when his phone rang, he answered immediately.

“Foster,” he said.

It was Bellamy. “Coop filled me in. What’s your take on all this?”

“It’s weird,” Ethan admitted. “There’s something else going on here. Nova rolled out early this morning, and you know how she is. If it’s DEA-related, it’s big.”

Bellamy paused before replying. “You think it’s connected to Liam?”

“I don’t know. Could be coincidence, but I’m not a huge believer in coincidence. If there’s something big involving the DEA happening on the Big Island, then chances are there’s some kind of connection.”

"I think you're right. I'll head to the school and check out their security. Just to be sure they can't get to Liam there. Rusty is coming along as well. No way these guys get Liam."

“Good call. Let me know if you need more backup. I really appreciate the help," Ethan said. “Brooklyn’s scared out of her mind, even if she won’t admit it. I appreciate you all stepping up.”

Bellamy chuckled. “She came to you for a reason. Just keep your head on straight.”

Ethan laughed. “No promises.”

The parking lot was full when Ethan pulled into the police station, but he was able to spy Brooklyn getting out of her car as he climbed out of his truck.

“What are you doing here?” he called out. “Is everything okay?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” she replied, her voice tight.

Ethan hesitated. He didn't want to scare her off or anger her by overstepping. “I figured it was time to talk to the cop who took your report on Tuesday. They need to know that the van was at your place last night. I thought you wouldn't want to deal with Peterson. The way you described him wasn't flattering. Sorry if I've overstepped.”

Brooklyn sighed as she brushed a stray tendril of hair out of your face. “I appreciate your efforts, but it isn't necessary. I got a call this morning. They've got some guys in custody. I'm here to see if I can identify them. I didn't want to bring Liam unless I had no choice.”

“That's smart,” Ethan said, holding the door open for her. “Let's get it over with.” She looked like she was going to argue with him but then, with a shrug, she entered the building.

Inside, Officer Peterson greeted them with a curt nod. “Miss Alexander.” He glanced at Ethan. “And you are?”

“Ethan Foster. I am a security consultant hired by Ms. Alexander.”

Peterson's eyebrows lifted. “I see.” He glanced back and forth between Brooklyn and Ethan, but her expression never changed. Peterson gave a small shrug. “We have three boys in custody. I'd like Ms. Alexander to take a look... See if you recognize any of them.”

The cop led them to a small room with a window looking into another room. “One-way mirror. They won't be able to see you,” he explained. “Each one will be

identified by a number. Let me know if you recognize anyone.”

Brooklyn nodded stiffly. “I understand.”

One by one, the boys were brought forward. Brooklyn studied their faces carefully. She leaned closer to the glass before shaking her head. “It’s none of them.”

Peterson frowned. “You’re sure?”

“Positive,” she said firmly. “The guys who tried to grab Liam were older—early twenties, maybe. These boys are too young. Also, none of them have bruises.”

“Bruises?” Peterson asked, narrowing his eyes.

Brooklyn folded her arms. “I hit one of them in the throat. Hard. It would’ve left a mark, and none of these kids have any.”

Peterson sighed. “These are the kids we’ve got for joyriding pranks. Are you sure you got a good look?” Doubt laced his voice. “You know, in the heat of the moment, things can get... confusing. Maybe you don't remember the whole thing the way you think you do.”

Brooklyn's eyes narrowed to slits. "I remember it perfectly. It's hard to forget when someone tries to kidnap your family."

"Um... yeah, well, sometimes it's not so cut and dried. Anyway," Peterson continued, "several other families have identified the boys so they will be charged. You can tell your nephew he's safe now."

“Yeah,” Brooklyn said coldly. “Sure. As soon as you catch the guys who tried to grab him.”

Peterson shifted uncomfortably. "Right. Okay, in the meantime, let me know if you notice anything else unusual."

Brooklyn opened her mouth but caught sight of Ethan shaking his head. She closed it again.

"We'll be in touch," Ethan said and then placed a reassuring hand on Brooklyn's back, ushering her toward the door. "We'll figure this out," he said quietly. "There's no point in arguing with him. He doesn't believe you and no matter what you tell him, you won't change his mind."

Brooklyn didn't answer. She stared straight ahead, her jaw tight. Ethan escorted her toward the door when he heard a familiar voice call his name. He turned to see Nova Martin approaching briskly.

"What are you doing here?" Ethan asked, surprised. He knew as a DEA agent she usually operated out of a different office.

Nova gave him a tight smile. "There's a...problem I've been asked to help with." She nodded toward Brooklyn. "Hey, Brooklyn. How are you doing?"

"I'm okay," Brooklyn replied, her voice steady but subdued.

"Sorry to hear about what happened to Liam. That's really tough," Nova said sympathetically.

Brooklyn nodded politely. "Yes, it is, but we're managing."

"That's good. I know Ethan is keeping an eye on you guys. You're in good hands with him and the rest of the boys," Nova said with a brief smile. Brooklyn gave a small nod but didn't comment.

“Anyway,” Nova continued, turning to Ethan, “can I chat with you for just a second?”

Puzzled, Ethan nodded. “Sure.” He turned to Brooklyn. “Why don’t you give me a minute, and then I’ll walk out with you?”

“No need,” Brooklyn said, shaking her head. “I’m going back to work. Maybe I’ll catch up with you later.” With that, she disappeared out the door.

Great, Ethan thought. That’s not going to be helpful at all. He wanted to talk to her about their next steps and now she seemed pissed with him.

He sighed to himself as he turned back to Nova. “What’s going on?”

Nova glanced around before gesturing for him to move closer to the corner near the door. “This morning, I got a phone call. The two guys who were in Halawa Prison on Oahu for the drug ring—my former boss and his accomplice? Someone shanked them. They’re both dead.”

Ethan raised an eyebrow. “What do you think is going on?”

“I think someone’s tying up loose ends,” Nova replied, her voice low.

“Makes sense, I guess,” Ethan said but he was completely puzzled why Nova would be sharing this with him. “Why are you telling me this?”

“You remember that plate number you asked me to check?” Nova asked.

Ethan’s gut tightened. “What about it?”

“The vehicle is registered to a company—one we know is a front for the Yakuza.”

“Your former boss was Yakuza?” Ethan asked incredulously.

She shook her head. “I think he had contacts within the Yakuza. I think they did business together.”

“And now you think the Yakuza had something to do with the kidnap attempt on Liam.”

Nova nodded. “I know it seems far-fetched, but...” She hesitated, then sighed. “You know as well as I do that sometimes kids get involved in all kinds of crap.”

Ethan’s chest tightened. “There’s no way Liam is involved in anything to do with the Yakuza. No way.”

“I’m not saying he is,” Nova said quickly. “But why would the Yakuza want to go after him?”

“No clue,” Ethan said, frustration creeping into his voice.

“Look, Ethan.” Nova glanced toward the officer behind the desk who was calling her name, “I’ve got to go. But I need you to talk to Brooklyn. See if she knows anything—anything at all.”

Ethan frowned. “I will, but it’s a long shot. She’s going to be as confused about this as I am. And Liam? He’s just a kid. He’s got his head buried in science fair projects, video games, and middle school shit. He’s not that kind of kid.”

“I hope you’re right,” Nova said. “But check it out anyway, will you? Let me know what you find.”

“I will,” Ethan replied.

Nova gave him a nod before walking off. Ethan stared after her, his mind racing. He couldn't figure out why the Yakuza would want anything to do with Liam, but whatever was going on, he was determined to get to the bottom of it.

CHAPTER 7

Brooklyn stepped out of her car and hurried into the office. As she passed through the waiting room, she offered polite smiles to the patients before heading to the back hallway and closing the door behind her. She leaned on the door and took a deep breath.

She hadn't gotten much sleep. Kissing Ethan in her little kitchen had excited her body and it had taken a while to calm down again. She knew sex with him would be fantastic. After all, they'd done it before. That had been the single best night of her life when it came to sex and that was hard to forget. Nate had paled in comparison. She needed to guard against it though. Keep her defenses up against Ethan.

More than anything else she couldn't bear to be hurt again by this man. She'd been more fragile than she'd realized after her relationship with Nate fell apart. She no longer trusted her own judgment after the fiasco with Nate.

Sleeping with Ethan had been her first encounter with any man after Nate. She'd thought she hit the jackpot. It had felt so good, so right. Then he ghosted her, proving she'd gotten it wrong again. That pain had been intense. She wasn't going through that again. No way. Her judgment when it came to men was obviously flawed. She needed to remember that and not get sucked in again.

And she needed to focus her energy on with was going on with Liam.

"Brooklyn, you okay? You look a little pale," the other hygienist asked as she passed by.

“I’m okay,” Brooklyn replied. “How’s it going today?”

“Same as usual. Not too busy.”

“Great. Just give me a few minutes, and I’ll be right in to start,” Brooklyn said.

“No rush. Take your time,” Sherry replied, her tone kind.

Brooklyn sank onto her chair, grateful for the support. Her thoughts raced as she tried to make sense of everything. The boys at the police station weren’t the ones who tried to take Liam. That much she knew. But if it wasn’t them, then who?

Her frustration mounted as she realized they were starting from scratch. The lack of answers made her feel worse than before. She thought about Ethan. Maybe she should have waited for him at the station. But she needed space to think, and so far, her thinking hadn’t gotten her anywhere. She wanted to call Christie again but didn’t want to ruin the rest of her friend’s vacation. Christie would worry and that wasn’t fair.

Brooklyn decided that after work, she’d have to sit down with Liam. Maybe he could help her make sense of things. Chances were, Ethan would want to join the conversation, and maybe that was for the best. She wasn’t thrilled about involving him, but she couldn’t deny he was good at this sort of thing. This was his area of expertise, and she didn’t have the first clue. She just had to remember that Ethan, no matter how appealing he was, no matter how safe he made her feel, held a temporary position in her world.

He could be trusted with her life but not with her heart.

Brooklyn sat in her car, nervously tapping the steering wheel as she waited for Liam to come out of school. He was two minutes late. On any other day, two minutes

would mean nothing, but today, she was on edge.

Where is he? she thought, glancing around. She hadn't seen the white van, which offered some relief, but not enough to calm her racing thoughts. Hadn't Ethan said some of the guys were here at the school, checking it out? She scanned the area but didn't see anyone who stood out. Her hand hovered over her phone, ready to call Ethan.

Just as she was about to hit the call button, Liam stepped through the doors, his backpack slung over one shoulder. Relief flooded her, and she let out a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding.

"Hey, Aunt Brooklyn," he said as he opened the car door, but he didn't slide in. Instead, he dumped his backpack inside and leaned down. "Would it be okay for me to stay and play video games with my friends for a bit? Mr. Williams, who runs the computer lab, is letting us play for an hour because we helped him install some updates to some computers in the lab."

Brooklyn's stomach rolled. "What about the science fair? Are you finished? What about your homework?" As she fired off the questions, Liam's face fell. Guilt washed over her.

"Who is going to be there?" she asked in a much more friendly tone. It wasn't fair to let her fear take over.

"Just Nakoa, Keoni, and me. It's just for an hour. Mr. Williams will be there the whole time. I'm almost finished with my science fair project. I can't do the rest until I put it in the gym tomorrow morning during science class. I only have some Math and History homework but it's not much. I promise I'll get it done." Liam looked so hopeful. "Please, can I stay?"

Brooklyn's stomach twisted. It went against every instinct to let him stay but that was her anxiety talking. "Okay," she said and gave him a small smile. "You have fun with your friends. Do you have your cell phone with you?"

He pulled it out of his back pocket. "Here it is."

"Call me when you're finished. Don't leave the school building until I am out front, okay?"

"Sure, no problem. Thanks, Aunt Brooklyn." He closed the car door and ran back into the school building. Brooklyn watched the door close behind Liam and then started her car. As she made her way through the parking lot, her heart pounded against her rib cage.

She just couldn't do it. She couldn't leave him behind.

She guided her car into a parking spot, turned the engine off, and sat there. Her hands were shaking. She had no idea how long it would take to get over this whole incident, but it wasn't going to happen today.

She wasn't going to leave Liam in school after hours with fewer people around. What if the van came back? She'd sit there in the parking lot and wait. It was only an hour—what else did she have to do?

Brooklyn watched as the other parents came, picked up their kids, and drove away. Soon, the parking lot was almost empty. A security guard, Harry Carr, walked over and knocked on her window.

"Mrs. Alexander?" he called.

Brooklyn rolled down her window. "It's Miss. And I've told you a million times,

Harry—call me Brooklyn.”

The guard smiled sheepishly. “Okay, Brooklyn. Is there a reason you’re sitting here?”

“Liam’s just staying after school to help with the computer lab,” she said, keeping her tone light. “I thought, since it’s only an hour or so, there wasn’t really enough time to do anything else. It’s such a beautiful day, I figured I’d just sit here and relax a little.”

He nodded and replied, “I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“I’m all good, Harry. Thanks very much.”

“All righty.” Harry tapped the door frame then moved away.

Brooklyn kept the window down, letting the breeze roll in. She didn’t know why she felt so strange—so on edge—but even Harry stopping to check in had unsettled her. Her phone buzzed, and she glanced at the screen.

She didn’t really want to talk to Ethan right now. The police station earlier had thrown her off completely. The fact that Ethan had thought to show up and update Peterson had been sweet—too sweet. And she didn’t want to feel that way about him, not since he’d ignored her after the night they’d spent together. He acted like nothing had happened; like she was a stranger. Even last night, when he’d offered to stay, he hadn’t suggested staying in her bed. Knowing he’d been on the couch, mere feet away, bordered on torture.

Still, she hesitated. If she didn’t answer, he’d probably keep calling. But she wasn’t ready to deal with him. She still needed to figure out how to deal with their kiss in the kitchen. Thank God for the kettle, or it would have been a hell of a lot more than kissing. She sent the call to voice mail and exhaled, her fingers trembling as she set the phone aside.

She glanced at her watch. Had it really only been twenty minutes? There was at least another forty minutes to go—longer if Mr. Williams let the boys keep playing. She rolled all the windows down and settled back in her seat, letting the ocean breeze wash over her.

As she looked around the now-empty parking lot, her gaze drifted to the soccer field, where a serious game was underway. She smiled when Liam's school scored a goal. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw it—a white van parked at the far edge of the lot.

Her mouth went dry, and icy fingers clawed at her chest. Could it be? Instantly, she was on high alert. Should she get out and check? Stay in the car? Run into the school and get Liam? Or call Harry back over to investigate?

None of the options felt right. If she called Harry, it could turn into a whole thing with the school—a conversation she didn't want to have. Liam would never forgive her. She decided to sit tight. After all, the van wasn't doing anything suspicious. Not yet. She reached for her phone and stared at it for a moment, chewing her lip. Should she? Forcing out a breath, she decided should call Ethan. If she was in danger, she had the luxury of doing nothing. But this was Liam's safety and she wasn't about to mess around when it came to that.

"Brooklyn, is everything okay?" Ethan's voice came down the line.

"I'm at Liam's school. There's a white van in the parking lot. Liam is still inside the school but I'm worried."

"Stay right where you are. Keep your phone next to you. I'll be there in ten minutes."

Brooklyn stared at the corner of the white van. She couldn't see it well since there was a dark blue SUV blocking it, but the corner of the van she could see resembled

the one from the other day.

Ten long minutes later, a familiar pickup truck pulled into the lot and parked next to her. Relief swept over her as Ethan climbed out. He bent down and rested his arms on the window frame. “You okay?” he asked.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” she said, her voice trembling slightly. Brooklyn pointed toward the far corner of the lot. “Look over there. It looks like there’s a white van. Tell me I’m wrong. Tell me I’m making this up.”

Ethan scanned the parking lot. “You’re not wrong,” he said grimly. “It’s a white van.”

“Damn,” she muttered.

“Don’t worry,” he said firmly. “I’m going to check it out. Stay right here. Liam is still inside?”

“Yes. He stayed after school to play video games with his friends. I said yes, but now I’m wondering if I made the wrong call.”

Ethan leaned closer. “Is there security?”

“Harry, the guard. He’s stationed just inside the doors.”

“OK,” Ethan said. “I’ll talk to him if necessary. Stay calm and stay right here.”

Brooklyn nodded, her heart hammering as Ethan walked away. He crossed the parking lot, phone in hand, and appeared to be making a call as he casually approached the soccer field. He glanced toward the van, then veered toward the bleachers, blending in with the parents watching the game.

Brooklyn watched him, her anxiety mounting. He paced along the bleachers, occasionally changing direction to avoid drawing attention. Finally, he made his way to the van, which was partially obscured by a large SUV. For a moment, he disappeared from view.

Her pulse quickened. What's taking so long? Then, Ethan reappeared, shaking his head as he slipped his phone into his pocket. He walked back to her car, opened the door, and slid into the passenger seat.

"It's a white van," he said. "But it's not the white van. It's a minivan. Probably one of the parents from the opposing team."

Brooklyn exhaled and her body sagged with relief. "I'm sorry." She rested her forehead on the steering wheel. "I just?—"

"Don't be sorry," Ethan interrupted, squeezing her shoulder. "You have nothing to apologize for. We found out today that the joyriding kids weren't the ones who tried to grab Liam. I'd be scared too."

"I just don't understand," she murmured, rubbing her face. "None of this makes sense. Who would want to kidnap Liam? My brother doesn't have money. I don't have money. There's no benefit for anyone."

"It's tough," Ethan said. He hesitated, his expression going blank.

"What is it?" Brooklyn demanded.

Ethan hesitated, then said, "I have some questions for you."

Brooklyn immediately tensed over his serious expression and his tone. "About what?"

“About something Nova told me.”

“Nova... the cop?”

Ethan nodded. “She’s actually DEA. She was there because something happened to some of the men she arrested.”

“What does that have to do with me and Liam?”

“Hopefully nothing.” Ethan scanned the parking lot and then met Brooklyn’s gaze. “Nova ran the plates on the van for us,” Ethan explained. “They came back registered to a company.”

“A company?” Brooklyn asked, frowning. “What kind of company?”

“It’s a front,” Ethan said. “On paper, it’s just another import-export company in Hawaii. There are plenty of those around, so it wouldn’t normally raise suspicion. But Nova tied it to the Yakuza.”

Brooklyn stared at him, her breath catching. “The Yakuza? What the hell would they want with Liam?”

“I don’t know,” Ethan admitted. “But it’s not random. The Yakuza don’t ‘borrow’ vans or use their resources for no reason. Whatever this is, it’s deliberate.”

Frustrated, Brooklyn slammed her fist against the steering wheel. “No. Maybe it’s just someone who works for them and it has nothing to do with the Yakuza directly.”

Ethan shook his head. “That’s not how it works. People don’t ‘accidentally’ work for the Yakuza. If someone involved in the kidnapping attempt is tied to them, then it’s their operation.”

Brooklyn's chest tightened as she tried to process his words. "Liam is just a kid! My brother doesn't have anything to do with organized crime. I don't have anything to do with organized crime. None of this makes sense."

"I know it's hard to understand," Ethan said gently. "But can you think back: Has anything unusual happened recently? Anything different, even before the attempt to take Liam?"

Brooklyn shook her head. "No. It's been normal. Liam's dad went on his business trip, so Liam came to stay with me. That's it."

"What about the day it happened?" Ethan pressed. "You guys were at the coffee shop. Did anything happen there?"

Brooklyn sighed, trying to recall. "No. Liam was just playing video games with his friends in the back, like always. Dave, the owner, lets the boys hang out there as long as they follow the rules and don't disturb his other customers. It's safe. Dave keeps an eye on them."

"Who was Liam playing with?" Ethan asked.

"His usual friends—Keoni, and Nakoa," Brooklyn replied. "Ren wasn't there that day."

Ethan nodded thoughtfully. "Do you think anything could have happened with them? Or maybe something was said?"

"Not that I know of," Brooklyn said. "And I didn't want to broadcast what happened, so I haven't mentioned the attempted abduction to anyone."

Ethan leaned back in his seat, his mind working. "We're going to have to talk to

Liam's friends. If he was targeted, we need to know if any of them were too."

Brooklyn frowned. "He's not going to like that."

"Probably not," Ethan agreed. "But we don't have much of a choice."

"Ethan, you can't just talk to the kids without their parents' permission. If someone did that to Liam, I'd be furious."

Ethan considered her words and nodded. "You're right. We'll do it the proper way. For now, let's talk to Liam and see if he remembers anything unusual."

Brooklyn sighed. "Fine. Let's wait here, take him home, and then talk to him about it."

Ethan's phone buzzed, and he answered it quickly. "Coop. Yeah, I spoke to Nova earlier. She gave me the rundown. Listen, I'm at Liam's school, and we're going to be here for a little while. Can you do me a favor? Run some names for me."

He glanced at Brooklyn. "Keoni Kobayashi, and Nakoa Mano," he said, repeating the names as Brooklyn supplied the last names.

"Got it," Coop said. "I'll get back to you."

"I don't know about checking out Liam's friends," Brooklyn commented when he hung up.

"It never hurts to know who you're dealing with," Ethan said. "This is an odd situation. We need all the information we can get."

Brooklyn understood but hesitated before asking, "Did you check me out?"

“No.” Ethan hesitated. “But I did run your brother.”

She stiffened. “What? Why?”

“If your brother had been involved in something, it would’ve explained this. But he’s clean, Brooklyn. There’s nothing there. And Deanna, his ex-wife—well, she seems like a piece of work, but I don’t think this has anything to do with her either.”

Brooklyn snorted. “That’s an understatement. She and her new husband are quite the pair. But I doubt they’re involved either.”

Ethan nodded. “All right. So, here’s the plan. When Liam’s done, you’ll take him home, and I’ll meet you there after I pick up Mojo. I want him with us tonight.”

Brooklyn nodded, though her nerves were still frayed. “I don’t have a babysitter for Liam.”

“You won’t need one,” Ethan assured her. “I have an idea.”

She frowned but agreed. “Okay, I’ll see you later.” She watched him get into his pickup truck. Yakuza. That was crazy. Insane. So why was fear unspooling like a snake in the pit of her stomach?

CHAPTER 8

“Thanks again for doing this.” Ethan and Rusty stood on the front porch of Brooklyn’s house, Mojo and Soda at their feet.

“Are you kidding me? A chance to play video games all night without Sienna hassling me? A dream come true.”

Ethan snorted. “Who are you kidding? You are madly in love with that woman, and she is the Queen of video gaming. You just want a chance to not get your ass handed to you.”

Rusty grinned. “True. But I don’t mind looking after Liam. I talked to Cooper today and he filled me in about the Yakuza angle. I just can’t figure out the connection.”

“Me either,” Ethan agreed. “Did Cooper mention if Nova said why the company and the assets weren’t seized and everyone connected with it arrested when the DEA raided?”

“I asked the very same question. Coop said what she knew and what she could prove were two entirely different things. They tracked more holdings when the police shut down that human trafficking ring under the Pearl Lagoon Resort. Viktor Wang was high up in the Yakuza, and with him dead, they had more freedom to poke around, but you know how it all goes. Kill one of them and another takes their place. I don’t think it made a huge dent in the overall holdings of the gang.”

Ethan grunted. “Not a surprise really. The Yakuza are brutal but smart. I have no idea

what an organization like that would want with Liam.”

The door opened and Brooklyn ushered the two men and their dogs in. “Thanks for helping out, Rusty.” She offered him a tight smile, the stress of the situation written on her face.

“Not a problem.” Rusty glanced over at Liam as the boy entered the room. “Hey, buddy. You must be Liam. I’ve heard a lot about you. I hear you and I are going to be playing some video games tonight. I hope you’re prepared to have your butt handed to you.”

Liam cackled. “You wish!” He immediately went down on his knees and petted Mojo who had taken up a position next to him. Liam turned to the other dog. “Who’s this?”

“Soda,” Rusty supplied. Liam ruffled Soda’s ears.

“Before you get too excited, did you finish your homework?” Brooklyn asked.

“Yes,” Liam said as he stood up, “I finished everything. Mr. Iona said I could glue everything down tomorrow when I take my project to the gym. And remember you said I could play video games after school tomorrow with Keoni and Nakoa.”

Brooklyn frowned. “We’ll see, okay, buddy?”

It was Liam’s turn to frown. “You said?—”

“What about Ren?” Brooklyn asked cutting him off. “Is he still out of school?”

Liam nodded. “I haven’t seen him since Monday.”

“Have you called him and asked him if there’s anything he needs?”

“Yeah, but he hasn’t responded.” Liam shrugged. “I guess he’s really sick.”

“Guess so,” Brooklyn agreed.

Ethan watched the exchange and thought it was better if they left on a good note. “So Liam? You ready to kick this old guy’s butt?” He pointed to Rusty.

Liam’s grin was back. “Absolutely.”

Brooklyn grabbed her purse off the table by the door. “If we’re not back in time, I want you in bed by nine.” Liam rolled his eyes, but she continued, “There are snacks in the kitchen. Have fun.”

“We will,” Rusty said as Liam handed him a remote and they sat down on the sofa, the dogs at their feet. They climbed in the truck and Ethan asked, “Where to first?”

“Let’s talk to Keoni first. He’s just two streets over. He lives with his aunt and uncle.”

“What happened to his folks?” Ethan asked.

“I have no idea. Whatever it is, it must be bad because no one ever mentions it. Keoni never talks about it, nor does anyone else.”

The drive took two minutes. After they rang the bell, the front door opened to reveal a beautiful woman with a warm smile. “Brooklyn!” the woman said immediately coming forward to hug her. “I am so sorry about what happened.” She stepped back. “Please come in.”

“Thanks, Leilani.” Brooklyn toed off her shoes and entered. “This is Ethan.” She gestured behind her.

Ethan finished taking off his boots and offered a hand to Leilani. “Nice to meet you, ma’am.”

Leilani laughed. “No need to call me ma’am. It makes me feel old. Come sit down.” She gestured toward the living area.

The house was bigger than Brooklyn’s and appeared to be professionally decorated. As they entered the living area, Ethan took note of the backyard pool, visible through the sliding patio doors. The paintings on the walls were originals and the rug under his feet was plush. This, along with the Mercedes in the driveway, told the tale. The Kobayashi family had money.

“I’ve just made some tea, Brooklyn. Would you like a cup?”

“Please. Leilani, I can’t thank you enough for speaking with us.”

Leilani gestured toward Ethan with the teapot, but he shook his head and she set the pot down after pouring herself a cup.

“It’s not a problem. You know you’re welcome any time, but I will say I was surprised you still wanted to talk. I heard the police caught the boys who were behind these awful events.”

Brooklyn glanced at Ethan, so he jumped in. “They did. However, the boys who were arrested weren’t the ones who attempted to kidnap Ethan.”

Leilani’s eyes opened wide as alarm spread across her face. “Really?” she breathed. “You’re sure?”

Brooklyn nodded. “I’m sure. They weren’t the same men. Have you noticed anything around the neighborhood, or around school? Anything out of the ordinary?”

Leilani shook her head. “No. Not a thing. I asked Rikishi, that’s my husband,” she added for Ethan. “He’s still at the office at the moment but he hasn’t seen anything either. I can’t understand it. Why would someone want to kidnap Liam?”

“We’re asking ourselves the same question,” Ethan said. “Do you mind if we talk to Keoni? Just to ask if he’s seen anything that struck him as odd or out of place?”

“Of course. Though, he’s not feeling well, so if you wouldn’t mind keeping it short.”

Brooklyn flashed a look of concern. “Oh, I didn’t realize. Liam didn’t mention it.”

“Must be what Ren has. I know he’s been out of school since Monday. Maybe keep your distance,” she said with a smile. “I hope Liam doesn’t come down with it.” Leilani stood and then disappeared in the back of the house but returned a few moments later with Keoni.

“Hey, Keoni,” Brooklyn said as the boy sat down on the chair across from them.

He looked a bit pale, but otherwise, he looked fine to Ethan. His eyes were clear if a bit wary, but he stayed buried in his hoodie, making it hard to really see his expression.

“Hey,” Keoni responded in a soft voice.

Keoni seemed stressed and Ethan was trying to figure out the best way to put the boy at ease when Brooklyn smiled. “Sorry to bother you. Are you playing online with Liam?” Keoni glanced quickly at Leilani but nodded. Brooklyn chuckled. “Are you kicking Rusty’s butt?”

Keoni grinned. “Yup. Man, he’s bad.”

“Who’s Rusty?” Leilani asked.

“My...friend. He’s watching Liam,” Ethan supplied.

Brooklyn shifted in her seat. “We won’t keep you then especially since you aren’t feeling well.”

As if on cue, Keoni coughed.

“I just wanted to ask if you have noticed anything odd or different lately.”

Keoni frowned. “Different?”

Brooklyn swallowed. She appeared to be struggling, so Ethan said, “Anything out of the ordinary. I’m willing to bet you all are pretty sharp and notice what goes on around you. Did you happen to see anyone following you or Liam? Anyone hanging around who shouldn’t have been?”

Keoni paused as if trying to remember something but then he shook his head. “Nope. It’s been the usual.” He glanced at his aunt, then added. “Nothing at school or at the cafe. Nothing different. Oh, except for my cold.” He coughed again.

Ethan knew they weren’t going to get anything out of the kid. He seemed uncomfortable, which might be because he wasn’t feeling well, or it could be because he knew something but made up his mind not to share the knowledge. No point in grilling him. It would just get ugly. The way Leilani was watching him, there was no way in hell she was going to let Ethan go after Keoni with any kind of aggressive questioning technique. To be honest, bullying a kid didn’t appeal to him anyway. “Okay. Well, that’s good. If you do notice anything let your mom know, okay?”

He nodded. “Can I go now?” he asked his aunt.

“Yes. Make sure your homework is finished before you go back to the game.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Keoni disappeared down the hallway.

Leilani took a sip of her tea, looked like she wanted to say something and then took another sip.

“What is it?” Ethan asked gently. “You seem to want to tell us something.”

Leilani hesitated.

Brooklyn leaned forward, reaching out to touch Leilani on the knee. “Anything you think might be helpful, please tell us.”

Leilani set her cup down. “I don’t like to speak ill of anyone...” Her voice faded out.

“But?” Brooklyn asked.

“Ren. There’s something...not right with his family.”

Ethan’s spine began to tingle, a sure sign they were about to find out something useful. “Not right how?”

“He lives with his uncle and his grandfather. I’ve seen the grandfather at some of the school events. You must have seen him, Brooklyn.”

“Yes...but I didn’t notice anything special about him.”

“You wouldn’t, not at school.” Leilani tucked her long dark hair behind her ear. “At school, he comes off as a nice, doddering older gentleman but I’ve seen him around town. He comes to our country club occasionally and he’s anything but doddering

there. As a matter of fact, he looks downright scary, and he always seems to have security with him.”

“So...what do you think he’s involved in? Something shady?” Ethan asked.

“I think...there’s more going on there than meets the eye,” Leilani finished. Her cell phone rang, and she pulled it out of her pocket, glancing at the screen. “I have to take this. I’m so sorry.”

Brooklyn opened her mouth to say something, but Ethan cut her off. “Okay,” He stood pulling Brooklyn up with him. “Thanks for telling us. We’ll make sure to look into it.” He went to the door, Brooklyn following in his wake.

Leilani answered the call and told the person on the phone to give her a minute. She followed them to the doorway where they put on their shoes. “If I hear or see anything I’ll call you.”

“Thanks.”

She offered Brooklyn another quick smile and then closed the door.

Brooklyn walked to the pickup truck and got in. As soon as Ethan closed his door, she turned on him. “I had more questions.”

“I know but I didn’t want you to ask them.”

“Why?” she demanded. “This is the first thing that anyone has said that might mean something.”

Ethan took a measured tone. “Yes, and the more questions you ask, the more attention Leilani will pay to it. If Ren’s family is just a bunch of wealthy

businessmen, then Leilani starting or spreading rumors is not going to help Ren or us. If they're something different, it's worse because Leilani will be drawing attention to them, and they won't like that. It will put her in the crosshairs. All she told us was that Ren's grandfather acted one way at school and another outside of that setting. It means nothing. She didn't know anything concrete, or she would have told us upfront. Anything else she said would have been supposition and of no use."

In reality, he thought there was something to all this but the last thing he wanted to do was get Brooklyn's hopes up, especially if he was wrong. Plus, he didn't want to screw up Ren's life at school. He knew firsthand what happened when someone spread a rumor that wasn't true. It could ruin lives.

Brooklyn flopped back in the seat. "So, we're nowhere is what you're saying."

"We need to talk to Nakoa. We'll look into Ren's family, but right now, I'm not sure why whoever Ren's family is would affect Liam."

Brooklyn sighed. "I hadn't thought of it like that. I guess it really doesn't matter who they are unless we can figure out why that would lead to someone kidnapping Liam. Or at least trying to."

"Do the boys look alike?" Ethan asked as he made a turn onto Nakoa's street.

"No. Ren is of Japanese descent. You've seen Keoni. Nakoa is Hawaiian as well, but his father is of Scottish and African descent."

"So, no mistaken identity."

Brooklyn shook her head. "Not unless they have never seen pictures of the boys."

"What does Keoni's father do?"

“Rick?” Brooklyn frowned. “I think he’s a lawyer.”

“He must be a partner in a big firm by the look of the house and what’s inside,” Ethan commented.

“I don’t think so. Seems to me he works at a small boutique kind of firm. He and a couple of others, that’s it. The money I think is hers from her family.”

Ethan said nothing until he parked in front of Nakoa’s house. “You go ahead. I’ll catch up. I’m going to make a call and see if we can start finding out about Ren’s grandfather.”

Brooklyn sighed but got out of the pick-up truck. Ethan hit a number on his phone. “Yo,” Rusty said. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah. Although I hear you’re getting your ass kicked.”

“Huh. Maybe,” Rusty agreed and then grunted and cursed under his breath.

“Hard work losing without making it obvious that you’re doing it on purpose, huh?”

“You have no idea,” Rusty agreed.

“Thanks, man. I really do appreciate it.”

“No problem. You need anything else?”

“No, just checking on you.”

Rusty swore under his breath. “I gotta go before I get killed again.” He hung up.

Ethan grinned as he made his next call. “Coop,” he said as the other man answered. “I need a favor. I need you to ask Nova to pull anything she can on a name I’m going to send you. It’s the grandfather of one of the kids. One of the other moms thinks there’s something shady about him.” He went on to explain what Leilani had said.

“Send it and I’ll get right on it.”

“Thanks, man, and good luck.”

“Yeah,” Coop said, “no problem. We want this thing sorted as much as you and Brooklyn.” With that, he hung up.

“Nakoa, you’re sure nothing odd or different has happened in the last few weeks?” Brooklyn asked as she rubbed her knuckles on her thigh. Ethan caught the movement and had to work to tear his gaze away. He would love to rub that same spot and not just with his hand.

Malia Mano watched her son. “Honey, close your eyes and relax for a second.” Nakoa reluctantly did as he was told. “Is all your homework finished?” his mom asked.

“Yes.”

“Are you playing video games with Keoni and Liam?” came the next question.

Nakoa grinned. “Yes, and we’re killing Rusty big time.”

Malia frowned.

“Rusty is looking after Liam for me,” Brooklyn interjected.

“Yeah, and he sucks at video games,” Nakoa added as he remained still with his eyes closed.

“Give me the list of your top ten video games,” his mom asked.

Ethan understood what Malia was doing. Getting Nakoa to relax so he wasn't so guarded with them. He only hoped it worked.

Nakoa finished his list, and his mother promptly asked, “What sticks out to you about the last week? Anything different?”

“No. Not with Liam anyway.”

Again, Ethan's gut pinged. “With who?” he asked gently.

Nakoa opened his eyes and immediately looked guilty. “I...don't want to get anyone in trouble.”

“No one is going to get in trouble,” Brooklyn said. “We just need to get to the bottom of what's going on.”

Nakoa looked glum but said, “I saw Ren and Keoni arguing on Monday, which was weird. We never argue. Anyway, they were standing by the lockers, practically yelling about something, but when I came up, they stopped. Like I said...weird.”

“Did you happen to hear what they were arguing about?” Nakoa's mom asked.

“Not really. I think it was about Liam's locker.”

Brooklyn glanced at Ethan and raised an eyebrow.

“Nakoa, did you catch any of what they were saying?” Ethan asked trying to keep his voice even.

Nakoa shook his head. “Not all of it. Keoni said something like ‘you shouldn’t have opened it without asking’ and Ren said, ‘it’s a friggin pencil.’ Then they stopped because they saw me.

Brooklyn deflated and let out a sigh. “Thanks for telling us, Nakoa. I won’t mention it to Liam.” She offered him a smile.

Relief bloomed on his face. “Thanks, Ms. Alexander.”

“You can go back to gaming now,” his mom said.

They all remained silent as he disappeared up the stairs.

Brooklyn immediately stood. “Thanks, Malia, I really appreciate it.”

She hugged Brooklyn. “I hope you find the answers you need.”

When they were back in the truck, heading to Brooklyn’s home, she commented, “That was a bust.”

“Maybe... maybe not. Nova is pulling anything she has on Ren’s grandfather. Maybe it will turn up something.”

As they got out of Ethan’s truck, Nova pulled into the driveway. “Hey.” Ethan greeted her once she got out of the car.

“Hey, you. I was on my way to meet Coop, but he said you were here, so I thought I would come by and update you.” She turned to Brooklyn. “Hey. I’m so sorry about

all this.”

“Thanks,” Brooklyn said. Her lips in a tight smile.

Nova glanced at Ethan. “I looked into the name you gave me. Ren’s grandfather, Hiroshi Yamamoto owns a company called Yamamoto Global. They make consumer electronic products. You know TVs, stereos, and the like. Think Panasonic, only Yamamoto sort of does it as a no name brand so it’s significantly cheaper. He’s worth billions.”

“No ties to organized crime?” Ethan asked.

She shook her head. “None that anyone can find. Coop filled me in. It makes sense that he tries to be normal at school around his grandson’s friends. I’m sure Ren doesn’t want the world to know how rich his family is. I also get the security. A man like that probably has to be careful.”

“So, there’s nothing there,” Brooklyn said with a dejected sigh.

“It doesn’t look like it.” Nova met Ethan’s gaze and then cut her eyes quickly to Brooklyn and back.

Ethan gave a tiny nod. He’d been thinking the same thing. Brooklyn was fraying around the edges. She was going to fall apart. “Thanks, Nova.”

She nodded. “If there’s anything else I can do, call me.”

“Will do.”

She got in her car and drove off.

“You okay,” Ethan asked.

Brooklyn met his gaze. Her eyes filled with tears. “No. Not really, but I’m not going to let that stop me.” She straightened her shoulders and headed to the house.

Ethan watched her go. Whatever the hell was going on, he needed to find out quickly because the situation was taking a toll on Brooklyn. He doubted she’d be able to take much more of not knowing, and he didn’t blame her one bit.

CHAPTER 9

Rusty and Soda left as Brooklyn sent Liam off to bed. Ethan had taken Mojo outside to do his business and she relished the moment alone. Having so many others in her space was weird and disconcerting. Especially when one of those someones was Ethan. Having him around made it hard to think. Who was she kidding? This whole mess made her head spin. Ethan had been the one constant over the last few days, which didn't help her any. She kept having to remind herself that he was the enemy no matter how 'friend-shaped' he looked.

"Do you think Liam noticed anything over the last couple of weeks?" Ethan asked.

"I think he would've told me if he'd noticed anything." She stood at the counter, arms crossed over her chest.

"Maybe, but maybe he didn't realize when he saw it what he was seeing. Does that make sense?"

She shrugged. The reality was she'd been wondering the same thing, but hadn't wanted to question Liam because it would bring the whole incident up again. She bit her lip as anxiety rose in her chest.

"He knew you were talking to his friends tonight. He's got to know there's something more going on," Ethan added.

Brooklyn glanced down at the floor. She didn't want to admit it, but she knew Ethan was right. It was time they spoke to her nephew again. "Maybe in the morning..." she

swallowed the rest of the words. Ethan stared at her, but he didn't have to speak for her to know she was being silly. They needed to talk to him now. The sooner the better. The more information they had the closer they could get to finding out the truth about all this.

"Fine." She sighed and went over to Liam's room. She knocked on the door. "Liam are you still awake?" she called softly.

"Yup," came the quick response. Her heart lurched in his chest. His response had been so quick that she knew he'd been lying there wide awake, worrying.

"Can you come out and talk to us for a second?"

"Sure," came the muffled voice again. Brooklyn went back to the counter and took a seat on a stool. Ethan offered her a smile as he leaned against the island.

"What's up?" Liam asked as he settled on the stool beside Brooklyn.

She studied his face. He was trying to act like everything was cool, but the worry in his eyes was clear. She reached out and squeezed his shoulder and then cleared her throat to try and get rid of the lump that had suddenly manifested. "I spoke with Keoni and Nakoa tonight."

"I know." Liam glanced at Ethan and then looked back at Brooklyn. "How come?"

"Because today at the police station, they arrested the boys who were responsible for taking those other kids for a joyride."

Liam frowned. "I don't understand, Aunt Brooklyn. That's good, right?"

"The boys they arrested weren't the ones that tried to grab you." Her heart broke as

the ramifications of that statement sunk in for Liam. His eyes grew wide and his lips tightened into a frown. She squeezed his shoulder again. “Ethan is keeping us safe, and we have the cameras. And look, Mojo is beside you. You’re okay.”

Liam glanced down at the dog. “I guess... but who would want to kidnap me? It’s not like we have money or anything.”

“We don’t know, buddy, but we’re going to find out.” Ethan moved to lean on the counter across from Liam. “Can you think of anything that was out of the ordinary in the last few weeks? Anything at all?”

“Is that what you asked my friends?” Liam asked.

Ethan nodded.

Brooklyn sighed. “I didn’t want to scare you, but I can see now it was silly of me not to talk to you first.”

Liam nodded. “I understand, but I don’t remember anything strange.”

“Nothing at all?” Ethan nudged.

Liam concentrated for a long moment, then shook his head. “I didn’t see anything or anyone unusual. Other than Ren being sick, it’s been the same as always.”

Brooklyn rubbed her face and tried to gather her thoughts. “Nothing out of the ordinary? Nothing at all... no matter how small?”

Liam cocked his head. “Um...no...well I mean I thought I lost my backpack on Monday so that was unusual I guess. I normally keep it right beside me when we’re at the cafe but when Dad came to get me, I couldn’t find it. I almost had a heart attack

cuz it had all my science fair stuff in it, but I found it. It was on the bench seat over by Keoni and Nakoa under everyone's jackets. I have no idea how it got there though."

Brooklyn's shoulders slumped. On the one hand, she was glad that nothing scary stuck out to Liam, but on the other, they had no leads and nowhere to go with this.

"Okay then, bud, time for bed. If anything comes to mind let me know." Brooklyn gave him a smile as he slipped off the stool.

"Come on, Mojo," Liam said and the dog followed him back to his room.

Brooklyn put her head down on the counter for a moment and wrapped her arms over it. This was all too much. She needed to call her brother and get him to fly home. He should be here to deal with...what? A sudden thought occurred to her. "Maybe we're overthinking things," she said as she sat back up.

"In what way?" Ethan asked.

"Well, we didn't see the van today. Maybe whoever was driving has gone. Maybe they decided not to bother with Liam again."

Ethan stared at her with a sad little smile on his face. "Do you really think that's likely?"

She stood up. "Why not? We can't find a single reason for someone to grab Liam, certainly nothing to do with the Yakuza. Maybe the whole thing was some sort of mistaken identity or just a mistake."

"It's possible, I guess, but I don't think you want to take any chances just yet."

Brooklyn stood in front of him, arms folded across her chest. He looked so sexy standing there in his jeans and t-shirt. All she wanted to do was fall into his arms and spend the rest of the night being lost in him. She remembered exactly how that felt, and no matter how she tried to restrain herself, she craved it again.

“I think we’re overreacting. I’m overreacting,” she corrected. “I’m sure nothing will happen in the next couple of days, and we can put all this behind us.”

“That would be the best-case scenario, and I certainly hope it’s true, but I think you’re grasping at straws, Brooklyn. I know this is hard, but we will find some answers.”

“When? When will we find them?” she demanded. “I can’t take much more of this. I feel...terrified, royally pissed off, and... helpless, all at once.”

“I get it. You just have to hang in there.”

Brooklyn ground her teeth. “I don’t want to hang in there. I need to be out from underneath the weight of this. It’s crushing me. I need a distraction. I need...” She met his gaze and desire flared in her. Her nipples got hard and her lady parts tingled. “Screw it,” she mumbled and took a step toward Ethan, planting a kiss on his lips, one that said she meant business. She needed a break from the pressure, and Ethan standing there, sexy as sin, was going to be that break. Whether he liked it or not. But he’d like it. The past didn’t matter. She knew he would ignore her after this and that was okay because she would know it was coming. The fact that she hadn’t expected it last time had caused all the pain. She’d be prepared this time.

Ethan cupped her shoulders and tried to ease away from her. “Brooklyn, is this a good idea?”

“It’s the only one I’ve got.” She wasn’t taking no for an answer. She closed the small

distance between their bodies.

He backed away again, but the light in his eyes warmed, encouraging her. She moved again, as did he, until his backside was against the kitchen counter, and there was nowhere else for him to retreat.

“Brooklyn—”

“Shut up and kiss me,” she demanded.

“Slow down,” he cautioned. “Tell me what you want.”

“I want you to fuck me, Ethan.”

His nostrils flared. “I don’t think this is a good idea.”

Hurt bloomed in her ribcage. “You don’t want me?”

He grabbed one of her hands and pressed it to the front of his pants. “Can’t even possibly believe I don’t want you. But I’m not sure it’s smart.”

“I’m done being smart about anything. I was done before... when we... Make me forget the last forty-eight hours, Ethan. Help me relieve this tension and fear.”

She reversed her hand in his, then gripped his wrist and guided his fingers between her legs. “Please.”

God, the heat of his palm on her center was a fiery jolt. She lifted her chin until her mouth was bathed by his breath. The soft puff of his breath lifted the hair around her face and his eyes slid shut as he lowered his mouth to hers.

The first touch was featherlight and sensual, but his lips turned insistent over hers and she opened, welcoming the intrusion of his tongue. She released his wrist and lifted her hands to cup his face. In turn, he skated his fingertips around her waist, stopping at the top of her butt.

She snuggled closer to him, rubbing her pelvis on his unmistakable erection. They both gasped and Ethan's hands dipped lower, skimming the crease of her ass before continuing south to cup her buttocks and lift her as if she weighed nothing. With her thighs wrapped around his waist, the friction on her clit ramped up to a thousand-watt- bulb level. She moaned and hitched her hips, seeking the heat of him at her center.

Ethan broke the kiss and trailed his mouth along her chin and down her throat. "I want you, Brooklyn. But I want you to be sure." He pulled his head away, banging his crown on the cupboard door behind him. "Are you sure?"

"I love that you are giving me an out, but I don't need it. I want this...I want you. I always have...since last—" She cut off her words as he whirled her around and settled her ass on the counter.

Sliding his hand up her sides, his thumbs nudging the sides of her breasts, he traced her collarbones as he began a slow descent down her front. He paused when his fingertips coasted over her nipples, and he squeezed the sensitized flesh, then tweaked her nipples twice before continuing south. He mouthed one peak as he slipped his hands under her skirt and moved north.

Her muscles twitched and trembled as his soft touch tickled her flesh. Gooseflesh rose on her entire body as the cool air caressed her exposed belly at the same time as his warm hands adjusted the cups of her bra out of his way and his hot mouth claimed first one nipple, then the other.

A sound from Liam's bedroom froze the needy moan in her throat, and she stiffened.

“What was that?”

Ethan mumbled against her breast, “That was Mojo. Sounds like he is settling in for the evening.” He licked one nipple, then traveled to the other to pay it equal attention.

“We shouldn't?—”

He lifted his head and cocked it to one side. “Changing your mind?”

“Hell no. I want this. I want us. But I can't fuck you in my kitchen with Liam right there.”

His chuckle was sexy as hell as he slipped his fingers under her skirt again, seeking the heat that must be blazing from her pussy. “Want to continue this in the bedroom?”

She pushed him backward then jumped off the counter. After skimming her palm over the stiff ridge in his jeans, she grabbed his hand and led him to her room.

With the door safely closed and locked, a flurry of hands and arms and legs ensued as they hurriedly ripped each other's clothes off. Even in the almost-nonexistent light in her bedroom, she recognized his dick. God, it was every bit as long and thick as she remembered, and she knew without a doubt her vagina was soaked and weeping for him.

Once they were completely naked, Ethan swept her off her feet and carried her to the bed, where he set her down and then swiftly dropped on top of her.

They fit together like Legos, tight and right.

He slipped his hand between their bodies and sought out the softest spot on her. He shifted a bit to his side, giving him free rein to tuck a finger into her sheath.

She rocked her hips, trying to draw him deeper. He accommodated by pressing in more, then adding a second digit. Her hips took up a rhythm of their own, lifting and falling as he increased his speed. The heel of his hand rubbed her clit, his mouth was ravenous on her tit, greedy, sucking and pulling. Pressure rapidly built inside, coiling tight, ready to soar.

“Need your dick in me, Ethan. I don’t want to come on your hand.”

He lifted his head from her breast and pinned her with a stare. “Bare or covered? I’m clean. It’s been a year since my last time and six months since my last clean test.”

A year? What the hell? Why was he lying? His fingers twitched inside her, pressing her g-spot and sparks flared in her head, scattering her thoughts. “Bare. I’m clean too.” They’d already been through this once.

He jerked his fingers from her body, then licked her juices from them, eyes closed as if in rapture. He captured her mouth, and she tasted herself on his tongue as he notched his tip at her entrance and then eased inside. She rocked her hips to take him deeper, the sensation of being full to the point of bursting overtaking every other sensation. Hot, wet wildness all but choked her as she stretched to accommodate his girth and length.

He gasped into her mouth and a shudder rumbled through him as he stilled inside her, waiting for her to adjust. Once she gripped his head and drew his mouth back to her breast, he began to move, using his entire body to slide into her, then back out. His pubic bone rubbed her clit with each thrust. His chest rubbed her breasts in a quickening rhythm. He palmed one breast and moved his face to her neck, murmuring encouraging noises. With each thrust, he pinched a nipple, bit the spot

where her neck met her shoulder, and sank deep inside her.

“Jesus, honey, you are so tight.” He sucked her earlobe, then dove deeper inside. He gripped her thigh and pulled her leg over his shoulder, opening her wider, hitting deeper.

The tension in her spooled tighter, like a spring ready to release. With her leg over him, her clit was on fire with each sweep of his hips. He used his shoulder to hold her in place, and slipped a hand behind her leg, seeking her clit. When he found it, he pinched it hard, and she shattered.

A blissful rainbow, brighter than anything she’d seen over Mahana Beach, flared behind her tightly closed lid as her body erupted in orgasm and she moaned his name.

The speed of his hips increased until he thrust hard and held still, his cock buried so hard within her that she spasmed a second time.

“Jesus, I think you killed me,” he chuckled into her ear as he rocked through an aftershock. His chest heaved in time with hers.

She ignored everything except the physical; the floating, nerve-tingling afterglow, the fullness in her vagina as he remained hard. She remembered from before how he stayed hard and took her back up in a spiral to a second orgasm last time. She’d never experienced anything like that before.

She peppered kisses on his shoulder and up his neck until he lifted his head and captured her lips in a deep, lingering, hungry kiss. His cock swelled inside her.

“Again?” he asked breathlessly.

“Hell yeah!”

And she gave herself over to light and sensation until she forgot everything, even her name, once again.

Brooklyn opened her eyes and swore silently. Ethan wasn't in bed, but she was sure he must be out in the kitchen. She rose abruptly and headed to her bathroom, her heart pounding in her chest. What the hell had she just done? She'd slept with Ethan again, despite swearing to herself she wouldn't. It was like throwing herself headlong into heartbreak, knowing full well how it would end. And damn it, it had been even better than the first time.

That only made it worse.

She thought she could do this...fuck him and forget him. What they'd just done hit harder than she thought.

She leaned over the sink, staring at her reflection in the mirror. Her flushed cheeks and slightly swollen lips were evidence of the amazing night she'd just had, but her eyes told a different story. They were haunted, darkened by the weight of her past and the mess she'd created for herself. Nate's betrayal had left a raw wound, and Ethan's earlier dismissal had only added to the ugly scars. It was fair to say she'd asked for it, but how much more could she take? How could she ever trust her judgment again? More importantly, could she trust Ethan to do what was best for her and Liam—or would he always put himself first?

Her teeth sank into her bottom lip as a fresh wave of guilt washed over her, making her chest feel like it was being squeezed in a vise. She hadn't told Jackson the truth. If she had, he'd be here now, making the tough decisions and taking this burden off her shoulders. Maybe that was what she needed—someone else to take control. But no, she hadn't done that, had she? She'd let Ethan back in, begged him to touch her, hold her. God, she didn't know if she was angrier with him or herself.

Ethan was her kryptonite, the chink in her armor she couldn't seem to guard against. Every smile, every fleeting touch from him ignited a fire inside her, a heat she couldn't extinguish no matter how hard she tried. It was infuriating and foolish. How could she be so stupid?

And now... now, she'd slept with him again. What if he walked out like nothing had happened? Worse, what if he told her he couldn't do this, that someone else would have to protect her and Liam? The thought sent a chill racing down her spine, but she shoved it aside. Regret wouldn't solve anything.

Splashing cold water on her face, she let the icy sting ground her. She straightened, squaring her shoulders and breathing deeply. Enough was enough. It was time to face the music. She needed answers, and she wouldn't let Ethan dodge her this time. He owed her honesty, and she wasn't backing down until she got it.

CHAPTER 10

Ethan turned on the shower and stood under the cold spray. He'd woken early with a massive headache. As much as he wanted to stay in Brooklyn's bed, he knew he needed to get out of there. He'd called Rusty, who came immediately, and he headed home.

The shower felt good on his aching skull. The frigid temperature was brutal, but it usually worked to kill his headache if he got to it fast enough. This one was bad. He'd thought he was done with these monster headaches but obviously his body had other ideas.

It didn't help that he'd had the dream again after he'd fallen asleep. The woman laughing and smiling. He couldn't see her face, just a glimpse of her jawline. A quick flash of ink, or a birthmark. All too fast and disjointed to make heads or tails of. Always the scent of her perfume in his nose when he woke up. Stupid. He had spent an amazing night with Brooklyn, better than he'd ever imagined and yet the woman still appeared in his dreams to haunt him.

He needed to get his head examined. Brooklyn was everything he could ever want, and yet he found himself wanting to put distance between them just in case . In case of what? Some fantasy coming to life? He snorted derisively, then sputtered as he inhaled some of the water.

The distance thing was probably not a bad idea though. Guilt washed over him. He should have said no to her. She was vulnerable, and he took advantage. She said yes, hell, she'd asked him, and was a willing participant, but he still couldn't help but feel

like the better choice would have been to say no. Sadly, he just wasn't that strong. He would, however, make it up to her today. They needed to get on the same page, even if that meant not being near each other.

He turned off the water and stepped out, quickly toweling himself off. Last night had been fantastic, better than he'd ever imagined. That was a helluva hard thing to give up. He sighed. It had also seemed...odd. A few times he'd had déjà vu, like he'd slept with Brooklyn before. Like he knew the curve of her hip and the hollow beneath her jawline. How his fingers felt inside her. He shrugged and continued to dry off. Whatever was going on in his brain, he wasn't going to dwell on it. It would just bring the headache back.

He quickly dressed in jeans and a white button-down. After rolling up his sleeves, he tucked his gun in his waistband at the small of his back. Moving toward the kitchen, he glanced at Mojo, who was conked out in his bed. The poor guy was totally done. Ethan couldn't blame him. Mojo had been keeping watch for what seemed like days, never truly relaxing and now that he was home, Mojo was taking full advantage.

Ethan made an omelet, and when Mojo opened an eye, Ethan chopped some chicken breast for a snack for the pooch. Sitting at his breakfast bar, drinking his coffee, he looked around his condo. He hadn't bought a house like some of his teammates. He was too used to being on the road. Why did he need a house? He just needed a place to lay his head when he was in town. That's what his places had always been.

Now that the Big Island was his home base, he knew he could get a more permanent place. but he hadn't thought it was necessary. Looking at the bare beige walls and generic furniture, he suddenly had a pang. Brooklyn had made her place a home. Somewhere to come and actually relax, enjoy time off. His place screamed only here for now. Except he wasn't a bachelor on the go anymore. Maybe it was time to buy a place, like his teammates.

His cell rang and he answered. “Bellamy, how’s it going?”

“I’m calling to ask you the same question. Did last night’s conversations yield anything useful?”

“Not a damn thing.” Ethan let out a sigh. “I’m nowhere on this and out of leads.”

“Shit,” Bellamy grunted. “Did Nova have any ideas?”

Ethan snorted. “Other than the Yakuza angle, nothing actionable. None of it makes any sense.”

“Yeah, no shit.”

Ethan took a sip of coffee. “Brooklyn tried to convince me, or maybe herself, that it was all a mistake. Like whoever tried to grab Liam just made an error, and now they’ve realized their error, so the danger has passed.”

“And what do you think of that?” Bellamy asked his voice neutral.

“I think it’s fucking wishful thinking. Someone wants Liam for whatever unknown reason, and they’re just regrouping trying to come up with another way to get him.”

“That sounds about right. Bad actors rarely ever give up and go home.”

“Yeah. There’s no way we’d be that lucky.” Ethan’s headache rumbled alive a little bit and he squeezed his eyes shut against the encroaching pain. “I was thinking of driving by the corner where the incident happened. Maybe there are cameras that no one noticed. I’m grasping at straws, but straws are all I have left. I’m out of ideas.”

Bellamy sighed. “I hear that. Let me know if you find anything or need any help.”

“Will do.” Ethan broke off the call.

He started to put his phone down but then thought the better of it. He dialed Brooklyn. He wanted to explain why he wasn't there when she woke up this morning, but the call went to voicemail. He glanced at his watch. She was probably already at work. He left her a quick message telling her that Rusty had been there to keep an eye on things this morning and that he'd be there once Liam got out of school.

That done, he got his wallet and keys and headed toward the door. Mojo lifted his head but Ethan told him to stay. The dog needed some downtime. Not too much because he'd get bored and into trouble, but he'd been on duty for a while now and deserved a little bit of R. Ethan drove slowly past the corner where the attempt to snatch Liam had occurred. Nothing stood out to him. Nothing that said this was the best place to grab the kid. He pulled a U-turn and then parked. He sat in his truck and looked at the corner. It was a three-way stop. A small restaurant on one corner, a dry cleaner on the other and a t-shirt shop at the top of the street. There was a parking lot next to that where Brooklyn must have parked her car.

A feeling of unease settled on Ethan. The guys in the van must have been following Brooklyn before the grab attempt in order for them to know she and Liam would walk up to the stop light. They could have easily parked in the other direction. There was no guarantee that they would walk to the light.

He didn't look forward to broaching that subject with her. She was frustrated enough that the kids hadn't noticed anything. Once he confronted her with the fact that she hadn't noticed it either, she was going to hurt.

Ethan continued to watch the traffic. It just solidified his notion that this was not a good spot for a kidnapping. Too many people around. Too much traffic to guarantee a swift getaway. No way to even be sure the light would be in their favor which would mean they might have to run the red and try to avoid hitting anyone. More and more,

he believed this was not a professional job. Whoever the guys were, they didn't seem to know how to criminal.

But that didn't jibe with the whole Yakuza thing. If the van was owned by the front company of the Yakuza, surely they would send experienced thugs who knew what the hell they were doing. Brooklyn said they were young. Maybe they were trying to impress the gang bosses. Still, he couldn't connect Liam to the Yakuza.

Ethan got out of his pickup and went over to the t-shirt shop first. He went inside and pretended to shop as he scouted around. No cameras, or at least none that he could see, and if he couldn't see them then, they wouldn't have the kind of angle needed anyway. The t-shirt shop had been a long shot.

He headed across the street to the restaurant. It was right on the corner where the incident occurred. In an ideal world, they would have cameras that picked up something. Ethan walked inside, and immediately, his heart sank. It was a hole-in-the-wall kind of place that served exceptional food but was bare bones about everything else. Great if you want a good meal. Shitty if you wanted anything else.

"Aloha, you can sit anywhere," the young woman said from behind a lunch counter.

"That's okay." Ethan offered her a smile. "I just had a couple of questions." He approached the counter. "By any chance, do you have cameras in here?"

The young woman frowned as she tucked her long dark hair up in a bun. "No, no cameras. The cops asked the same thing the other day when those guys tried to grab that kid."

"You were here for that?" Ethan's hopes rose. "I'm working with the boy's family to figure out what's going on. Did you recognize anyone?"

She shook her head. “Nope, never saw any of them before...which is kind of odd when I think about it. The Big Island isn’t that big when it comes to locals, you know? They looked to be about my age so you’d think I would have run into them somewhere.” She shook her head.

Ethan’s hopes sank. He pulled out a card from his back pocket and handed it to her. “If you think of anything or see those guys again, give me a call.”

“Sure,” she said as she took the card and then picked up the coffee pot heading toward the end of the counter to refill a few cups.

Ethan stood on the sidewalk and debated going down to talk to the café owner, Dave, but he couldn’t see any point really. If Dave knew anything he would have reached out by the sound of things. Instead, Ethan headed across the street to the dry cleaners.

He held the door open for a customer on her way out and then walked in. A young man stood at the counter serving another patron. Ethan glanced around as he waited. No obvious cameras. He looked up on the shelf over on the far wall and a smile touched his lips as he spied a nanny cam hidden in the plant. He wondered if the kid behind the counter even knew it was there.

The other patron left, and the young man switched his focus to Ethan. “Can I help you?”

“Yes, is the owner here, or the manager?”

The young man frowned. “She’s in the back, but are you sure I can’t help you with something?”

“Were you here the other day during the attempted kidnapping of the boy across the street?”

“It was awful,” the clerk lamented.

“Did you recognize any of the men involved?” Ethan asked.

“No. Never seen them before.”

Ethan tried another tact. “Did the cops ask you about having any cameras?”

This time he got a nod. “Yes, they did, but, unfortunately, we don’t have any.”

Ethan had figured as much. The kid had no idea that a nanny camera was there. It was well hidden in the greenery. So much so that it made it obvious that the owner didn’t want anyone to know they were watching. “I would like to speak to the owner please.”

The young man shrugged. “Okay.” He disappeared behind a rack of clothing and then reappeared a moment later with a diminutive Asian woman in tow.

“How can I help you?” she asked in a surprisingly deep voice.

Ethan smiled. “Could we talk privately?”

She frowned and glanced at the clerk. “Ollie, please go in the back and check the latest deliveries. Make sure everything is ready to go out.”

Ollie said nothing but disappeared behind the rack of dry cleaning again.

“What do you want?” the woman demanded.

“I want to see the footage from your cameras.”

The woman shook her head. “We don’t have any cameras.”

Ethan smiled slightly. “You have one right up there.” He pointed. “My guess is you use it to watch the cash register. You must be worried your employees are skimming. Or maybe you’re skimming yourself from some other type of business. Wouldn’t be the first time a dry cleaner has been used to front a drug operation.” The woman opened her mouth ostensibly to protest but Ethan continued. “Lady, I don’t care why you have the camera, and I have no interest in your business, but a little boy was almost kidnapped across the street earlier this week and I’ve been hired to find out who is behind it.” He handed her his card. “I need to see your footage.”

The woman’s eyes narrowed as she glanced first at the card and then back up at him. Finally, she nodded. “Come with me.”

Ethan pulled open the small door and followed the woman deeper into the shop. They entered the back office. “Ollie, go back up front.”

Ollie jolted to his feet and hurried out of the office, which was a good thing because the office was tiny and cramped with papers and clothing on every single surface except the desktop and the keyboard on the desk.

The woman sat down at the desktop and started typing on the keyboard. Ethan realized he didn’t know her name but was smart enough to know that he didn’t really need it, and if he did it would be easy enough to find out. He would send the cops over if anything good was on the video.

The woman turned around a moment later and handed him a USB stick. “Here. This has the last week on it. I like Ollie, but my nephew also works here and he’s not as respectful or trustworthy. I’d fire him, but I need proof first, or my sister won’t believe me that he’s stealing.”

Ethan nodded. “Good help is hard to find. Working with family is never easy.”

She kissed her fingertips and waved them at the ceiling in a your lips to God’s ear’ gesture.

“Thanks for this,” he said. “If there’s anything useful on it, I will have to send the cops over to get their own copy.”

The woman sighed, resigned to the inevitable. “I hope this helps.”

Ethan offered her his hand and they shook. He returned to his pickup. Time to go back to the comms center and see what he had. With luck, he might be able to see the faces of the men involved. That would get them somewhere because, at the moment, they were dead in the water, and that was the last place he wanted to be when it came to Brooklyn and Liam.

CHAPTER 11

“You’re all set, Mrs. Rosenthal,” Brooklyn said in a warm tone as she gently removed the protective bib from her elderly patient.

“Thank you, dear.” The older woman’s voice trembled with kindness, and Brooklyn couldn’t help but smile back.

Brooklyn offered her arm to steady Mrs. Rosenthal, helping her ease out of the chair. “Let me walk you up front,” she said, guiding the woman out to the reception desk.

“See you in six months,” Brooklyn called as Mrs. Rosenthal waved and began settling her payment.

As soon as she turned back toward her exam room, Brooklyn’s focus shifted. She had a routine—clean the chair, wipe down the surfaces, and set up for the next patient. It was automatic, a rhythm she’d perfected over the years.

The sharp tone of her cell phone sliced through the quiet hum of the office. She hesitated for a moment, glancing at the screen before answering.

“Hello?” she said, balancing the phone between her ear and shoulder while tossing the used disinfectant wipe into the trash.

“Ms. Alexander?”

“Yes.”

“This is Krista Kahana...” The woman on the other end paused as if weighing her words before continuing. “I’m the principal at Mauna Loa Preparatory School.”

Brooklyn’s stomach dropped. The casual grip she had on the phone tightened until her knuckles turned white. “Yes?” she managed, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Ms. Alexander, when you take a child out of school, it’s mandatory to sign them out with the school office. I understand you’re Liam’s aunt, so you may not be familiar with all of our policies, but we need to ensure everyone follows the procedures. It’s for the safety of all our students.”

Brooklyn’s throat constricted, the words catching before they could form. She gripped the counter with her free hand, trying to steady herself. “I... I didn’t take Liam out,” she said, her voice faltering.

“I’m sorry, what was that? I didn’t quite catch it.”

Her breathing grew shallow as dread tightened in her chest. She swallowed hard and tried again. “I didn’t take Liam out of school.”

There was a long, tense pause on the other end of the line.

“Well, you must have,” Kahana said, her tone laced with confusion. “His English teacher reported him absent.”

The air around Brooklyn shifted, the world narrowing to the sickening truth clawing its way to the forefront of her mind. Her voice, though shaking, grew more resolute. “Mrs. Kahana,” she said carefully, “please call the police. If Liam isn’t in school, it’s because he’s been taken.”

“What?” Krista’s voice rose in clear disbelief.

“Please!” Brooklyn begged, her voice cracking under the weight of her fear. “Call the police right now. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

She ended the call abruptly, her trembling fingers barely able to press the screen. There was no point in lingering on the line; she already knew the truth. Deep down, she felt it—an icy, suffocating certainty.

Liam had been kidnapped.

Her knees buckled as the weight of the realization crushed her. She collapsed onto the small stool by the counter, gripping the edge like a lifeline. The once-familiar surroundings of her exam room blurred into a haze of sterile whites and pale blues.

A rush of panic surged through her, accompanied by a singular thought that cut through the chaos: I have to find him. I have to get him back .

Brooklyn pushed herself upright, her legs unsteady but driven by sheer will. Her heart pounded as she grabbed her bag and rushed for the door, her mind already racing with possibilities.

Somewhere out there, Liam needed her—and she would do whatever it took to bring him home.

CHAPTER 12

Ethan pushed open the door to the comms center, the scent of coffee and French fries meeting him as he strolled in. “Hey, Rusty. How are you doing?”

Rusty glanced up from his desk as he popped a fry into his mouth and chewed. “Good. How about you? Anything new with the Liam situation?”

Ethan dropped into the chair beside him, the frame creaking under his weight. “As a matter of fact, yes.”

“Oh, yeah?” asked Cooper from the corner, his voice tinged with curiosity.

Ethan turned, startled. “Didn’t realize you were here too.”

Cooper leaned back in his chair, hands clasped behind his head. “Just dropped by to work on a few things with Whiskey.”

“Cool,” Ethan said, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a USB drive. He held it up, the plastic catching the fluorescent light. “This is something the cops missed.”

Coop raised an eyebrow, his expression sharpening with interest. “Nova’s going to be thrilled to hear that. She’s not local PD, but she hates it when they screw up. Reflects badly on everyone.

Ethan shook his head. “It’s not the cops’ fault. Someone didn’t tell them the truth—or didn’t know it.”

Rusty sat up, pulling his chair closer to Ethan. “Fill us in.”

Ethan booted up the laptop in front of him, the faint hum of its fan filling the silence. “I went to the corner where those guys tried to grab Liam,” he began, his tone measured. “I’ve got to say, it’s not the kind of location you’d pick for a snatch-and-grab. Too many witnesses. Too many variables.”

Rusty leaned forward. “Like what?”

“For starters,” Ethan said, pulling up a map of the area, “you can’t predict which direction someone’s going to head when they leave a place like Dave’s Café. If they were targeting Brooklyn, they’d have had to follow her there. But that corner? It’s crowded. People everywhere. Traffic lights changing constantly. The whole setup was sloppy—amateur. The Yakuza doesn’t do amateur.”

Rusty frowned, his brows knitting together. “No, they don’t. When they pull something, it’s clean. Precise.”

“Unless,” Cooper added thoughtfully, “they didn’t have time to plan. What if it was a heat-of-the-moment thing? Someone gave them a location, and they acted fast.”

Ethan nodded, his mouth tightening. “That’s what I’m thinking. It wasn’t planned. Whatever set this off happened quickly, probably that day. But if they weren’t following Brooklyn, how the hell did they know where she and Liam would be? And how did they know where she parked? She could have just as easily parked somewhere else.”

Rusty let out a low whistle. “You think they had a lookout in the cafe?” He shook his head. “Yeah, this is sounding sketchier by the second.”

“I think it’s a distinct possibility that someone in Dave’s tipped off the Yakuza when

Brooklyn arrived. I'm guessing whoever that was also told them the direction she came from. They might have even circled the block to locate her car but that also might have been too risky. Either way, they were definitely tipped off."

Ethan plugged the USB drive into the laptop that was in front of him. "While I was there, I talked to everyone in the shops around that corner. One of them, a dry cleaner, had a nanny cam hidden in a potted plant. When the cops came through, the kid working the counter didn't know it existed, so he couldn't tell them about it."

Rusty leaned closer. "But you spotted it?"

"Yep. The owner installed it to keep an eye on her nephew, who's been skimming cash from the register. She didn't even realize the camera caught something important until I pointed it out. She gave me the footage."

Ethan navigated to the video and then teed it up to a few minutes before when Brooklyn said the whole thing went down. "Let's take a look," he said, clicking play.

The grainy footage showed Liam walking along to the corner. Moments later, a van screeched to a halt in front of him. Two men jumped out, moving fast. Then Brooklyn appeared, her figure tense as she lunged at one of the men, striking his neck. The struggle played out in the frame—Brooklyn clinging to Liam as the other man tried to drag him toward the van.

Ethan paused the video. "Shit," he said, zooming in on the men. "Those are definitely Yakuza tats. I spent some time looking them up online so I could identify them on sight. They both have sleeves and this guy"—he pointed to the one holding Liam—"has some on his neck."

Rusty grunted. "Confirmation on the Yakuza connection. But that still doesn't explain what they wanted with Liam."

Ethan hit play. The guy pulling on Liam's arm looked up suddenly. Ethan paused again. "It's just like Brooklyn said. Some guy yelled from down the block, and it spooked them."

Hitting play again, Ethan leaned forward in his chair to study the screen. The guy let go of Liam, shoved his buddy into the van, and they sped out of the frame. Ethan paused the video.

"Not very professional," Cooper commented, his voice laced with sarcasm.

"Not even close," Rusty muttered.

Ethan leaned back in his chair, running a hand through his hair. "This wasn't well thought out. It wasn't planned. They realized where Liam was and acted fast. These tattooed guys are for sure Yakuza."

Rusty ate another fry. "I think I have to agree with you. Looking at the video, if they didn't tail Brooklyn, then someone had to have tipped them off."

Copper whistled low. "That's not good."

"No, it's not," Ethan said grimly. "Either someone in that café is connected, or there was a lookout. But it begs the question once again: Why were they looking for Liam in the first place? Having a lookout would imply they knew he would be there. Why would the Yakuza know where a group of kids play video games after school?"

"Do you think it could have been the kids Liam was with?" Rusty asked then ate his last fry.

Ethan tapped the desktop, his fingers drumming an anxious rhythm. "No, it's not the kids. They didn't say anything at least not on purpose." He leaned back, his jaw

tightening. “I’ve talked to them. They’re not the type to have contacts with the Yakuza—they’re just not. So if those two boys tipped off the Yakuza, they did it unintentionally. I think someone else had to tell them where Liam would be.”

Rusty tilted his head, his brow furrowed in thought. “Don’t they normally play at Dave’s Café? Didn’t you tell me that’s their usual spot?”

“They do,” Ethan agreed, “but not on Tuesdays. That’s what makes this so strange. This was a one-off, not something they normally do. It would’ve been out of the ordinary—something no one could predict unless they had inside information.”

Cooper leaned forward, resting his arms on his knees. “Do you think it was someone who works at the café?”

Ethan’s shrug was tight with frustration. “It’s a possibility. I can’t say for sure. It could be someone who works there. Maybe the Yakuza spread the word, and someone recognized them. Or maybe someone overheard a conversation. Right now, it’s all guesswork.”

“Or…” Rusty added, “Someone at the café is connected and tipped them off.”

Ethan nodded grimly. “That’s possible too.”

“Run the video again,” Cooper suggested.

Ethan hit play, and they all watched the footage one more time. The van, the struggle, the sudden retreat—it played out like a chaotic blur on the grainy screen. At the end, Ethan zoomed in on the driver of the van. The man’s face was partially obscured, but the image was clear enough to make out key details.

“I think this is the closest we’re going to get to a clear shot,” Ethan said.

Rusty leaned in, studying the screen. “Agreed. He’s your best bet. We’ll run this through facial recognition.”

“Can you handle that?” Ethan asked.

“Yeah, I’ve got it,” Rusty replied. “Where are you going?”

“I’m heading back to the café,” Ethan said, standing and grabbing his jacket. “I need to talk to some people and see if I can figure out what’s going on.”

Rusty frowned. “Be careful. If these guys are connected to the Yakuza, you don’t want to draw attention to yourself.”

Cooper leaned back in his chair, his expression serious. “He’s right. If someone there is an informant, you don’t want to piss them off by asking too many questions.”

Ethan smirked. “Probably not, but I’m going to anyway.” He turned to Cooper. “Can you do me a favor? Swing by my place and pick up Mojo. He’s been spending the nights over at Brooklyn’s, and he was so happy to see his own bed this morning that he passed out cold. He just needs a little exercise. I know you’re taking Whiskey out today anyway.”

Cooper nodded. “Not a problem. I’ll grab him. He and Whiskey can burn off some energy together.”

“Thanks,” Ethan said as his phone buzzed in his pocket. He pulled it out and answered quickly. “Brooklyn?”

Her voice trembled on the other end of the line. “Ethan, they have Liam.”

The words hit him like a punch to the gut. “What do you mean they have Liam? He

was at school.”

“He was,” Brooklyn said, her voice breaking. “But the school just called me. He was there at recess, but when it was over, he was gone.”

Ethan swore under his breath. “Are they sure?”

“Yes,” she whispered, the agony in her voice wrapping around every word. “I need you to meet me at the school.”

“Where are you?” Ethan demanded, his tone sharper than he intended.

“I’m leaving work,” she replied, her voice cracking.

“Stay there. I’ll come get you.”

“No, I need to be at the school?—”

“Brooklyn,” Ethan interrupted, his voice firm but steady. “You’re in no condition to drive right now. Stay put. I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

She hesitated, then whispered, “Okay.” The line went dead.

Ethan shoved the phone into his pocket and turned back to Cooper and Rusty. “They’ve got Liam,” he said tightly. “They took him from school.”

“What?” Cooper shot to his feet. “Are you serious?”

Ethan nodded tersely.

Cooper grabbed his phone. “I’m calling Nova I’ll have her meet us there. I’ll swing

by and get Mojo on the way.”

Rusty nodded, his expression hardening. “What can I do?”

In a grim tone, Ethan said, “Run that facial recognition. Look at the tattoos. Anything you can find. The faster we ID these guys, the faster we can get Liam back.”

Rusty was already typing. “I’ll call Bellamy too, get him in the loop, and start working on a plan.”

“Good,” Ethan said as he headed for the door. “Let’s move.”

Ten seconds later, the truck’s engine roared to life and Ethan tore out of the driveway. His chest ached, the weight of guilt pressing harder with every mile. He’d promised Brooklyn he’d protect Liam, and now he’d failed her.

CHAPTER 13

Brooklyn's heart thudded heavily as she and Ethan pushed through the glass doors of Liam's school. He had stopped briefly to speak to the officer outside. He'd asked if there was a detective on scene but the officer had said she wasn't there yet.

The cheerful posters and brightly painted walls were jarring, mocking her with their innocence. Her nephew was missing, and the last place he had been was here—the one place he should have been safe. The one place she'd thought he would be safe. It was her fault he was gone. Stupidly, she hadn't demanded that Ethan be with Liam twenty-four-seven.

The principal's office was located at the end of a hallway filled with colorful lockers and bulletin boards announcing upcoming field trips. Mundane details blurred together as Brooklyn's eyes darted nervously around, searching for anything that might offer answers. Beside her, Ethan was a steady presence, but his jaw was clenched in a hard line, his eyes scanning as intently as hers. At least she wasn't facing this nightmare alone. She knew she shouldn't be relying on him to prop her up emotionally but, especially now, she would take whatever support she could get.

The secretary at the front desk glanced up as they entered the office. Her polite smile faltered when Brooklyn gave her name. Contritely, she said, "I am so sorry, Ms. Alexander," the woman said as she took in Brooklyn's pale face and Ethan's stormy expression.

"We need to speak with Principal Kahana," Brooklyn said, her voice trembling despite her efforts to sound composed.

The woman's expression shifted to one of concern. "She's expecting you. Please, go in."

Brooklyn nodded her thanks and crossed the room, pushing open the door marked Principal's Office.

Inside, Principal Kahana rose from behind her desk, her warm brown eyes filled with sympathy. She was a tall woman with a commanding presence, her dark hair streaked with silver and pulled back into a neat bun. The Hawaiian print blouse she wore seemed incongruous with the grim expression on her face.

"She greeted them, her voice calm but serious. "Please, sit."

Brooklyn hesitated, her hands twisting together as emotions froze her in place. She didn't want sympathy, she wanted her nephew back. Ethan rested a steadying hand on her lower back, guiding her to the chair nearest the desk. She sank into it, her stomach churning.

"What happened?" Brooklyn asked, her voice tight. "How did Liam... how could he just disappear?"

Ms. Kahana's lips pressed into a thin line as she sat back down. "Ms. Alexander and Mister?"

"Foster," Ethan supplied.

She nodded. "I'll explain everything we know, but first, let me say how deeply sorry I am. This is an unprecedented situation, and we are doing everything in our power to assist law enforcement and ensure Liam's safety."

Brooklyn's fingers clenched into fists. Words of comfort were meaningless when

Liam was missing. She wanted action. Answers.

The principal leaned forward with a serious expression. “Liam was last seen during recess. He walked across the playground and approached a black SUV parked just outside the gate. He got into the vehicle willingly, carrying his backpack.”

Brooklyn’s breath hitched. “Willingly? Are you sure? Did anyone see who was in the SUV?”

Principal Kahana shook her head. “Unfortunately, the vehicle had tinted windows, and there were no visible plates. Our security cameras captured footage of the incident, which I’ve reviewed, but I’d like you to see it for yourselves. Mr. Hale, our head of security, is standing by to assist.”

Ethan’s voice was low and firm when he said, “We need access to that footage immediately. Every second counts.”

Principal Kahana nodded and pressed a button on her desk phone. “Mr. Hale, please join us in my office.”

Moments later, the door opened, and a tall, broad-shouldered man stepped inside. He was neatly dressed, and his sharp eyes seemed to miss nothing as they scanned the room. He was a far cry from Harry, the security guard Brooklyn always saw on duty.

“Principal Kahana,” he said with a nod before turning his attention to Brooklyn and Ethan. “I’m Mark Hale, head of security for Mauna Loa School. I’ve been reviewing the footage and coordinating with the authorities.”

Brooklyn frowned at him. “Where is Harry? He is usually so good about looking out for the kids.”

“Harry is out sick. He hurt his back. Eugene was on duty but failed to notice Liam walk down the driveway.”

“I need to see the footage,” Ethan said without preamble.

Hale nodded. “Of course. Follow me.”

Brooklyn’s legs felt shaky as she stood, but Ethan’s hand on her arm grounded her. They followed the man down a hallway to a small room filled with monitors and computer equipment. The hum of electronics filled the space, and the air smelled faintly of stale coffee.

Hale moved to a workstation, his fingers flying across the keyboard. “This is the camera that captured the incident,” he said, pulling up a video feed. “The timestamp coincides with recess; about twenty minutes before Liam was reported missing.”

Brooklyn leaned forward, her breath shallow as the video began to play. The camera showed a clear view of the playground. Children laughed and ran, their carefree movements a sharp contrast to the wrenching fear in her chest. Liam appeared on the screen, standing near the swings with his backpack slung over one shoulder.

“There he is,” she whispered, her throat tight.

The video continued, showing Liam turning away from the playground and walking toward the fence. A black SUV idled just beyond the gate, its windows dark and impenetrable. Liam stopped for a moment, as if considering something, then opened the gate and approached the vehicle.

Brooklyn’s stomach churned. “Why would he do that? He knows better than to get into a stranger’s car. And why didn’t anyone stop him? They should’ve known something was going on. He would never bring his backpack to recess.”

Hale's voice was calm but edged with tension. "As I said, Harry is out sick, and Eugene is new. He isn't as familiar with the goings on here as yet. Liam must've recognized whoever was inside the vehicle. Or thought he did."

On the screen, Liam opened the back door of the SUV and climbed in. The door shut behind him, and the vehicle pulled away, disappearing from the frame. Brooklyn's hands flew to her mouth, stifling a sob.

Hale paused the video, the image frozen on the SUV just before it left the frame. "There are no plates," he said. "And with the windows tinted that dark, we couldn't identify the driver or any passengers."

"What about Liam's phone?" Ethan asked. "He had it with him, right?"

Hale nodded. "He did. I informed the officer, and he said they had already contacted Liam's provider to initiate a trace, but so far, there has been no activity. Either the phone has been turned off, or it's been destroyed. You will have to follow up with them to get more details."

Brooklyn's knees felt weak, and she gripped the edge of her chair for support. "Who could... why would anyone do this?" Her voice broke, and Ethan's hand cupped her shoulder, grounding her again.

"We'll figure it out," Ethan said firmly. "But we need more information. Are there any other cameras in the area? Something that might show where the SUV went?"

Hale hesitated. "There are a few traffic cameras near the main road. I've already requested access from the city, but it could take time to get the footage."

"We don't have time," Ethan said, his tone sharp. "Get me the contact information for whoever manages those cameras. I'll make some calls."

Hale nodded. "I'll email you the details."

Brooklyn's mind raced as she stared at the frozen image of the SUV. "What about the gate? Was it unlocked?"

"It shouldn't have been," Hale said, frowning. "We're looking into whether it was tampered with. The latch is supposed to be secured during school hours."

Brooklyn's heart sank further. "If it wasn't secure, that's on the school. Liam should never have been able to get out that easily."

Hale bowed his head. "Again, Harry always walked down to check and make sure but with him out sick and Eugene being new, there was an unfortunate security gap. That gate should have been locked. I can only profoundly apologize."

Principal Kahana, who had followed them into the room, wrung her hands "You have my word that we're investigating every angle. This never should have happened, and we will do everything in our power to make it right."

Brooklyn swallowed hard, nodding. She wanted to believe the principal, but it wasn't enough. Nothing would be enough until Liam was found.

Ethan stood, his movements sharp and deliberate. "We need to move fast. The longer we wait, the colder the trail gets. Brooklyn, are you okay?"

She nodded, though the answer was far from the truth. Her chest felt hollow, her breaths shallow and ragged. But breaking down wouldn't help Liam. She had to stay strong for him.

"I'm fine," she forced the words out. "What do we do next?"

Ethan's gaze met hers, steady and determined. "We start with the traffic cameras. If we can figure out where that SUV went, we'll have our next lead."

Principal Kahana spoke up. "If there's anything else we can do to help, please don't hesitate to ask. Mr. Hale and I will continue working with the authorities and reviewing the footage."

"Thank you," Ethan said, his tone clipped but sincere. He turned to Brooklyn. "Let's go."

Brooklyn followed him out of the room on trembling legs. The bright hallways felt stifling now, the laughter of unseen children a cruel reminder that Liam had been taken. As they reached the parking lot, Ethan's truck came into view, a solid, reassuring presence in the chaos.

Ethan opened the passenger door for her, his expression softening for just a moment. "We'll find him, Brooklyn. I promise."

Tears stung her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. "We have to. It's my fault he's missing."

"It is not your fault." Ethan was trying to reassure her, but she knew the truth.

"Jackson had asked me to put a tracking software for Liam on my phone and I just...forgot to do it. We had even talked about getting an air tag for him, but well, it's the Big Island, and there's a lot of wide open space. Air tags only work if there are other cell phones to bounce the locations off of. The tracking software was what we agreed on and I just...forgot. It's all my fault."

She climbed into the truck, her mind replaying the footage over and over. Liam's small figure walking to that SUV. The door closing behind him. The vehicle driving

away. It was a loop of horror she couldn't escape.

CHAPTER 14

Ethan leaned against his truck, his arms crossed as he watched Brooklyn sitting in the passenger seat. Her legs dangled out the open door, her hands gripping the edge of the seat as if it were the only thing keeping her upright. Her face was pale, her lips pressed into a tight seam in an apparent effort to hold herself together. His gut twisted at the sight. He hated seeing her like this—shaken, vulnerable. But he knew there was no time to focus on emotions. They needed answers.

The low growl of a car engine pulled his attention toward the entrance of the parking lot. A sleek black sedan came to a stop, and Nova stepped out. She moved with the kind of confidence that came from years of experience, her dark jeans and white blouse crisp, and her ponytail swinging as she approached.

“Ethan.” Her greeting was brisk but tinged with concern. Her sharp gaze flicked to Brooklyn before landing back on him. “What do we have so far?”

Before Ethan could answer, a second vehicle pulled in, this one a rugged SUV. Cooper jumped out, his lean frame moving with practiced ease. Beside him, Whiskey and Mojo bounded out of the backseat. Mojo’s sharp eyes immediately scanned the area. Ethan’s tension eased just a fraction at the sight of his dog. Mojo was more than a partner—he was a lifeline.

“Brought the cavalry,” Cooper said, his tone light but his expression serious. He handed Mojo’s lead to Ethan. “Thought he’d want to stretch his legs.”

Ethan crouched to rub behind Mojo’s ears, the dog’s tail wagging briefly before he

settled into an alert stance. “Good boy. You ready to work?” Mojo’s ears perked up as if he understood every word.

“You working this, Nova?” Ethan asked. He knew this wouldn’t fall under her jurisdiction normally and he didn’t want to piss off the local cops. They were going to need all the help they could get.

“I wouldn’t normally but with the death of my two guys in prison and the van linking to them and the Yakuza, I have some leeway on this.”

“Alright, that’s good. We’ll take all the help we can get.” Ethan rose to his feet and faced the group. “Here’s what we know. Liam walked out of the school during recess and got into a black SUV parked outside the gate. He had his backpack and his phone with him. The SUV had no plates, and the windows were tinted so dark we couldn’t see who was inside.”

Nova nodded, pulling out a notepad. “Did he appear to be forced into the vehicle?”

Brooklyn’s voice was faint but steady as she answered. “No. He got in on his own. He must have known whoever was in that SUV. Liam would never just go with a stranger.”

“That narrows things down,” Nova said, jotting a note. “We need to figure out who he’d trust enough to follow. Family? Friends?”

Ethan shook his head. “It could be someone who knew just enough about him to fake familiarity. Liam’s smart, but he’s also a kid. A friendly face and the right words could have been enough.”

Cooper folded his arms. “What about the school guard? Isn’t there usually someone at the gate?”

Brooklyn looked up, her brow furrowing. "Harry's been there for years. But he's out sick today."

"That's worth checking out," Ethan said, his voice hardening. "If Harry's not here, we need to know why. Someone should go to his house and make sure he's okay." His gaze locked with Cooper. They were both thinking the same thing. Someone had to make sure Harry really was sick and not just hiding because he was paid not to be here. "I'll handle that," he added, glancing at Mojo. "We'll take the dog. If something's wrong, Mojo can help."

Nova nodded. "Brooklyn, Cooper has been keeping me up to date. You are absolutely sure Liam has no connection to the Yakuza?"

Brooklyn's face hardened. "Yes," she hissed. "He's a twelve-year-old boy. What possible connection could he have?"

"You would be surprised," was all Nova said but Ethan understood. There was so much in the world that all of them except Brooklyn had been exposed to. Nothing would surprise them anymore. Things that just made them sad.

"Nova, Brooklyn and I spoke to his best friends. These kids aren't involved." Ethan sent her a look and she gave him a nod back. He knew she would take him at his word which is what he wanted. No point in wasting time checking out something he had already covered.

"Is there anything else?" Nova asked. "Anything at all?"

Brooklyn shook her head but held a frosty silence.

Nova put her notebook away. "I'm going in to talk to the principal and the head of security. I'll look at the video and check with the officers that responded." She met

Brooklyn's gaze. "We're going to do everything in our power to get your nephew back, Brooklyn. I promise."

Brooklyn hesitated but appeared to thaw enough to nod. Ethan knew Nova was just doing her job, but it would help if Brooklyn understood that as well.

"Good call," Cooper said. "Meanwhile, I'll head back to the comms center and see what I can pull from the traffic cameras. We need to track that SUV before the trail goes cold."

Nova glanced at her phone screen at an incoming message. "It looks like we're having a few issues with the phone company, but I'll follow up on Liam's phone. If he had it with him, we might be able to trace it or at least get a sense of who he's been talking to recently."

Cooper commented, "What about Dave's Café? We already know someone there tipped off the Yakuza before. It can't be a coincidence that Liam ended up targeted after being there."

Brooklyn let out a small yelp of surprise. "You think someone from Dave's is involved?"

Ethan shrugged. "Let's just say someone at the café knows more than they're saying. But, that's going to take some digging." He glanced at Cooper. "We'll hit there after we're done with Harry but do me a favor and have Rusty and Bellamy standing by at the comms center. I might send a bunch of photos, and I'll need a fast turnaround on any and all information. I'll start with the regulars and see where it leads."

"On it," Cooper replied, his expression grim. "If someone's connected to the Yakuza, we'll find them."

Nova cleared her throat. “I will pretend I didn’t hear any of what you guys are going to do because all of it should be done by a cop. I know you all won’t stand down and, quite frankly, since this involves a kid, I don’t want you to.”

A tense silence fell over the group, the weight of the situation pressing down on them. Brooklyn stared at the pavement, her hands balled into fists on her lap. Ethan moved closer, standing beside her.

“We’ll find him,” he said quietly. “I won’t stop until we do.”

Her eyes met his, and for a moment, the fierce determination in her gaze matched his own. “Neither will I,” she whispered.

Ethan straightened, his focus shifting back to the task at hand. “Alright, let’s move. We’ll regroup later and share whatever we find.”

Nova nodded. “I’ll be in touch. If anything turns up with the phone, I’ll let you know immediately.”

Cooper gave a sharp nod before heading back to his SUV, Whiskey’s lead still in hand. Mojo gave a low whine, as if sensing the tension, but a quick command from Ethan had him obediently hopping into the backseat.

Brooklyn closed the door of the truck. Ethan slid behind the wheel, the engine roaring to life, and then he backed out of the parking space. The silence between them was thick, Brooklyn’s unspoken fears, and his, hung heavy in the air.

As they drove toward Harry’s house, Ethan glanced at Brooklyn. She was staring out the window, her fingers tracing aimless patterns on the edge of her seat.

“Do you really think Harry is involved?” she asked.

“It’s my job to think everyone is involved,” he replied. He didn’t want to scare her, but he also wasn’t going to lie to her. “If Harry is involved then he’s our next lead. Make no mistake, I will find out everything he knows.”

Brooklyn shivered but remained silent.

“You okay?” Ethan asked, breaking the quiet.

She hesitated, then shook her head. “I’m scared,” she admitted. “But I can’t let that stop me. Liam needs all the help he can get.” Her thoughts flicked to Jackson. She was going to have to call him soon and tell him the awful news. He would be devastated. She wanted to wait until she had more information, something positive to tell him. Or at least that’s what she was telling herself. Really, she just didn’t want to tell her brother she’d lost the light of his life.

Ethan’s grip on the wheel tightened. “We’re going to find him,” he said again, his voice firm. “And whoever took him is going to regret it.” He meant every word of it. Every. Single. One.

Harry’s house was a modest single-story home on a quiet street. The front yard was tidy, the grass neatly trimmed. Ethan parked the truck at the curb and stepped out. Mojo hopped down beside him, both of them watching for any sign of movement inside. Brooklyn followed, her eyes scanning the property nervously. The place looked deserted.

Ethan knocked on the door, the sound echoing in the stillness. Brooklyn spoke up. “Harry? It’s Brooklyn Alexander. Can we chat for a minute?”

There was no response. Mojo’s ears perked up, his body tense as he sniffed and quietly growled. Ethan’s instincts flared.

“Stay here,” he told Brooklyn, his voice low. He gestured for Mojo to follow as he moved to the side of the house, checking the windows. Everything appeared normal until he reached the back door. It was ajar, swinging slightly in the breeze.

Ethan’s stomach sank. He glanced at Mojo, whose fur bristled as he stood at alert. Drawing his weapon, Ethan pushed the door open and stepped inside. The house was ominously silent.

“Harry?” he called out, his voice firm but cautious.

Mojo moved ahead, his nose to the ground as he sniffed for any trace of Harry. They moved through the house methodically, checking each room. The living room was untouched, the TV remote resting neatly on the arm of the couch. The kitchen showed no signs of disturbance. But when they reached the bedroom, Ethan froze.

Harry lay sprawled on the floor. A dark bruise marred his temple, and a small trickle of blood had dried on his forehead. He was pale but breathing. Mojo sniffed him, whining softly as he looked back at Ethan.

“Dammit,” Ethan muttered, crouching beside the older man. He pressed two fingers to Harry’s neck, finding a pulse but just barely. “Harry? Can you hear me?”

The man stirred slightly, a low groan escaping his lips. His eyes fluttered open, unfocused and glassy. “Who are you?” he rasped.

“I’m a friend of Brooklyn Alexander’s,” Ethan said, relief washing over him. “What happened?”

“Brook...lyn?” Harry was having a hard time forming words. His pupils flared. “Oh no...Liam...okay?”

“They took him,” Ethan confirmed. “Tell me what you know?” There was a sound behind him. He whirled to find Brooklyn at the doorway. He wanted to curse but he said, “Call an ambulance.” Then he turned back to the man on the floor.

Harry’s eyes lost focus and started to close.

“Harry?” Ethan felt the man’s pulse again. Still there but weak.

Harry opened his eyes. “Someone... came...asked about... Liam. Said they...were family. I told...get lost...left my phone in the bedroom... was going for it when they—” He grimaced, his voice fading. “They... hit me.”

Ethan’s jaw clenched. “Did you see their faces?”

Harry “No... hoodies and ballcaps pulled low...Black SUV...Dark windows. Going to kill me but...dog next door...barking like crazy...they hit me again...” His voice faded out.

The description matched the vehicle from the school. Ethan cursed under his breath. Whoever had taken Liam had planned this well.

“Stay still,” he said. “We’ll get you help. Did they make you call the school and say you were sick?”

Harry started to shake his head but winced. “Email from...computer. Tried...stop them but—” He moved his hand and that’s when Ethan realized two of the man’s fingers were broken.

Brooklyn had stepped away to call for help and then appeared in the doorway, her eyes wide with fear.

“Is he okay?” she asked, her voice trembling.

“He’ll be alright.” Ethan had no idea if Harry would make it. The head injury was obviously more severe than it looked, but telling Brooklyn that wouldn’t help. “But we need to get him to a hospital. And we need to move fast.” Again, he wanted to say something reassuring but what could he say? The reality was the kidnappers, most likely the Yakuza, had Liam and knew their time was limited before everyone realized he was gone. None of it boded well for Liam. He was on the clock too. If they didn’t find him in time, the Yakuza would kill him. Ethan knew he had to make it in time. He could not let that little boy die.

CHAPTER 15

Brooklyn sat stiffly in Ethan's truck as they sped toward Dave's Café. The low growl of the engine matched the tension humming in her chest. She stared out the window, her mind racing as she tried to piece together the puzzle of Liam's disappearance. The scenery blurred past, but she didn't register any of it—her thoughts were trapped in the memory of Tuesday.

She'd gone to the café to pick up Liam like she had dozens of times before. But now, as she thought back, an uneasy feeling crept over her. Who had been there that day? She pictured the café in her mind.

Dave had been behind the counter, his apron spackled with flour as he worked the espresso machine. He'd smiled at her as always, but had there been something off about it? She couldn't be sure. Her focus had been on Liam, who was chatting animatedly with one of his friends at a corner table.

She'd known they were going to argue about him having to leave. He had to work on his science fair project. That's what she'd been thinking about at the time. His science fair project. It seemed ridiculous now, but it had seemed so important at the time.

Then there was Lily, one of the baristas. Brooklyn's jaw tightened at the thought of her. Lily was always flirting with every man who walked through the door, her bright laugh and exaggerated smiles impossible to miss. Brooklyn had dismissed her behavior as harmless before, but now she wondered. Could Lily have said something to the wrong person? Given away too much information without realizing the danger? Or, more likely, she'd shared the fact the boys were there with some male who had

struck her fancy, never dreaming there'd be any consequences.

"A penny for them."

Ethan's voice broke into her thoughts. His hands gripped the steering wheel, his knuckles tight, but his tone was calm. Reassuring. She'd been so angry when she'd come out of the bathroom this morning to find he was already gone. She ignored his call earlier but now she was so incredibly grateful that he hadn't ignored hers. His quiet strength and reassurance helped her keep it together. Without him to lean on she was sure this would be so much harder.

"I'm trying to remember who was there when I picked up Liam on Tuesday," Brooklyn admitted. "Everything's blurred together, and now I'm second-guessing everything."

Ethan nodded. "Start with what you know for sure. Who stood out?" He rubbed the back of his neck.

"Dave was there, of course," she said, biting her lip. "And Lily. She's always there. She flirts with everyone... maybe she said something to the wrong person? Or even called someone who asked her to keep an eye out?"

Ethan glanced over, his expression unreadable. "We'll figure it out." He ran a hand over his face.

Brooklyn frowned. "Are you feeling okay?" She'd been so caught up in everything that she hadn't even noticed Ethan looked like he was uncomfortable.

"Just a headache," he said dismissively but then winced when a truck next to them honked the horn.

“Are you sure?” Panic gripped her. She needed Ethan’s help. He couldn’t be sick. Not now.

“Ah...I was in a car accident a while ago and got a concussion. It flares up every once in a while. I’ll take something for it when we get to the café.”

“Oh my God. When did that happen?” How had she not known this? Easily, was the answer. After he hadn’t bothered to call her their one night together, she’d avoided him.

“Do you remember that huge rainstorm six months back? It happened early that morning. It had rained all night and the retiree driving the other car just didn’t see me through the drops.”

Heat flew up into her cheeks and then drained again. He was talking about the night they’d been together. The morning when she woke up to find him gone. Just like today. “Were you hurt? Other than the concussion, that is?” Sweat broke out across her back.

“No,” he said shooting her a brief smile. “I was not too far from your place actually when it happened, or so they tell me. I have no memory of it. I lost about twenty-four hours, but other than that I’m fine.”

Brooklyn wanted to scream. All this time, she’d been thinking he ghosted her, and instead, he’d been in the hospital. He didn’t recall them being together. Heat filled her cheeks again and she turned to look out the window. She’d been a royal bitch to him this entire time and he’d done nothing to deserve it.

She bit her lip, turning his words over in her mind as they pulled into the parking lot. She owed him a huge apology. She closed her eyes. Thinking about all that now wasn’t going to help. She pushed it from her mind as a detail to address after this

ordeal was over.

Dave's Café looked the same as ever, its quaint brick facade and hand-painted sign beckoning patrons inside. But today, it felt different. Menacing, almost. She shivered as she climbed out of the truck, Mojo's leash in Ethan's hand as the dog hopped down and trotted at his side.

The bell above the door jingled as they entered. The familiar scent of coffee and cinnamon didn't bring the usual comfort. Dave stood behind the counter, wiping down the surface with a damp cloth. He looked up as they walked in, his face lighting up with his usual friendly grin.

"Brooklyn," he said by way of a greeting. "What brings you by?" He glanced at his watch. "The boys won't be in for another couple of hours."

Brooklyn felt a pang of guilt. Dave had always been kind to her and Liam, offering extra cookies and making jokes to keep Liam laughing. But something in Ethan's posture made her hesitate. He was tense, watchful, like a predator waiting for his moment to strike.

"I...um...need some coffee." She turned to Ethan. "What would you like?" Ethan placed his order and the two of them waited as Dave made their drinks.

"We need to talk," Ethan said, his tone calm but firm as Dave placed their drinks in front of them. "Privately."

Dave's brows knitted together in confusion, but he nodded. "Who are you?"

"Sorry, Dave, I should have introduced you. This is Ethan. He's helping me with..." her voice broke. The lump in her throat grew spontaneously and she couldn't seem to swallow to get her words around it.

“Uh...” Dave started uncertainly but the look on her face must have told him something was very wrong because he said, “Come with me.”

They followed him through the swinging door behind the counter, into a small storage room crowded with shelves of supplies. Mojo sniffed the air, his ears flicking as he stayed close to Ethan’s side. Dave leaned against a shelf, crossing his arms.

“What’s happened?” he asked, his tone wary now.

Brooklyn stepped forward, her voice shaking slightly. “Liam’s been kidnapped, Dave. Someone lured him into a black SUV outside his school.”

Dave’s face paled. “What? Taken? That’s... that’s terrible! Who would do something like that?”

Ethan’s eyes narrowed. “That’s what we’re trying to figure out. We think someone might have tipped them off the other day. Someone who knew Liam’s routine.”

Dave’s hands fidgeted with the rag he was still holding, his gaze darting to the floor. “I... I don’t know anything about that. You know I’d never...”

Brooklyn’s heart sank as she watched him. The easy confidence that usually radiated from the man was gone, replaced by a nervous energy that set her on edge.

“Dave,” she said softly, stepping closer. “We’re not accusing you of anything. But if you know something, anything, you have to tell us. Liam’s life depends on it.”

Dave’s throat worked as he swallowed hard. “I don’t know,” he said again, his voice cracking. “I don’t...”

Ethan stepped in then, his tone sharper. “Cut the crap, Dave. You’re hiding

something. A blind man could see it. Whatever you're holding back is going to come out one way or another. You might as well save us all some time, save Liam's life, and tell us now."

Brooklyn's stomach churned as she watched the exchange. Dave's hands trembled, and his eyes darted around the room, refusing to meet Ethan's gaze.

"It was you," she whispered, the realization knocking the air from her lungs. "You called someone about Liam."

Dave's head snapped up, his face a mask of panic. "No! I didn't... I mean... it's not what you think!"

"Then what is it?" Ethan demanded, his voice low and dangerous.

Dave sagged against the shelf, his shoulders slumping in defeat. "I didn't mean for this to happen. I swear. I was desperate. I borrowed money from some guys I shouldn't have... for my gambling debts. They said they'd forgive it if I gave them some information. They didn't say why. I didn't know they'd..."

The room spun around her, and she clutched the edge of a shelf for support. Her voice rang with disbelief. "You sold Liam out to pay off your debts? Jesus Christ, he's a little boy. How much did you owe?"

Dave's eyes filled with tears. "A lot. Way more than I can ever pay back but I didn't know they'd take him! They just wanted to know his schedule and who he was with. I thought... I thought it was nothing."

Ethan's jaw tightened and he clenched his hands into fists. "Who did you call, Dave? Names. Now."

Dave wiped his face with a trembling hand. “A guy named Kenici. He... he works for the Yakuza. I... I can give you his number.”

“You’re damn right you will,” Ethan said, his voice icy. “And you’re going to pray that Liam comes back safe because if he doesn’t, there won’t be a hole deep enough for you to hide in.”

Brooklyn turned away, tears streaming down her face as the weight of Dave’s betrayal crashed over her. She’d trusted him. Liam had trusted him. And he’d handed her nephew over to a fucking gang.

Ethan’s hand settled on her shoulder, grounding her. “We’ll fix this,” he said quietly. “But we need to move fast.”

Brooklyn forced herself to stand tall. Liam needed her to be strong, and she wouldn’t let him down. Not now. Not ever.

CHAPTER 16

Ethan sat on the edge of the couch in Brooklyn's living room, his phone propped up against a stack of books on the coffee table. The warm glow of a nearby lamp bathed the room in a soft, golden light, but the tension in his chest made the space feel far from comforting. Mojo lay at his feet, the Malinois's sharp eyes fixed on the doorway leading to the hallway. The faint sound of water running in the bathroom reminded him that Brooklyn was in the shower, trying to wash away the day's chaos.

They were no closer to finding Liam than when they'd first started looking.

She'd been pale and shaky when they returned to her house, but she hadn't argued when he suggested she clean up while he handled the next steps. Now, the scent of vanilla wafted faintly through the air, teasing his senses. It was such a stark contrast to the woman in his dreams—a fantasy he'd carried with him since he'd woken up in the hospital. That woman had smelled like citrus and summer rain, a combination as elusive and ethereal as the dream itself. But Brooklyn? She was real. Solid. And no matter how much his mind tried to connect the two, he knew they couldn't be the same.

Not that it mattered. The woman in his dreams was a figment of his imagination, a shadow of something he'd never had, likely never would have. Brooklyn was here, and she was facing a nightmare no one should have to endure. The best way to help her was to focus.

Ethan pulled his thoughts back to the task at hand and leaned forward, tapping the screen of his phone to ensure the video call connection was stable. He'd taken a

couple of Advil and his headache had finally receded to a dull thump. Cooper's face filled the screen first, his sharp features set in a grim expression. Rusty joined a second later, his hair standing on end like he'd run his hands through it a thousand times. Bellamy stood behind the two guys, arms crossed over his chest looking like he could kill at any second.

"What've you got?" Cooper asked, skipping any preamble.

It was Ethan's turn to run a hand through his hair, exhaling sharply. "We talked to Harry and Dave. It's worse than I thought."

Rusty frowned. "Define 'worse.'"

"Harry's in the hospital," Ethan said, his voice tight. "Someone came to Harry's place asking about Liam. Harry tried to stop them, but they knocked him out. He barely remembers anything—just a black SUV and someone claiming to be family."

Cooper let out a low whistle. "They're not even trying to be subtle." He paused. "Does that seem right to you?"

"How do you mean?" Ethan asked.

"Why bother asking Harry anything? They could just watch what happens by parking on the street. Are they in that much of a hurry that they don't have time to do a bit of recon?"

Ethan blew out a breath. "They were in the beginning, but I see what you're getting at. They haven't made a move for a couple of days so they would have had time to stake out the school and see how things are done."

"Just a thought," Coop continued, "but I think there might be more to the whole

Harry thing.”

Suddenly, Ethan sat up straighter. Coop was right. He hadn’t seen it immediately but now it stood out to him. “It was a set up. They only went to Harry’s so they could kill him and blame the whole thing on him as the mastermind behind it. They sent a message to the school from Harry’s email account saying he was ill. Who knows what else they might have planted.”

“You think they were setting him up, but then why leave him alive?” Rusty asked.

“The neighbor’s dog started barking like crazy. They couldn’t kill him then without attracting more attention, so they whacked him over the head and hoped he died or at least stayed down long enough for him to be blamed for Liam’s kidnapping and...” Ethan stopped speaking. He couldn’t say the next words.

“His death,” Bellamy said

“Yeah,” Ethan muttered. He took a breath, as did his teammates. They were all on the clock and knew it. A kid would die if they didn’t figure this shit out. Brooklyn would never survive that. Ethan pushed all that emotion aside. Emotion wasn’t going to help them now. Logical thinking was.

He continued his briefing as he’d done so many times before. “And then there’s Dave.” He glanced toward the hallway, ensuring the bathroom door remained closed before continuing. “He’s got a gambling problem and borrowed money from the wrong people. They told him they’d forgive his debt if he fed them information about Liam.”

Rusty’s eyes narrowed. “Did he know they were planning to take the kid?”

“Claims he didn’t,” Ethan replied, his tone laced with skepticism. “But he gave them

a call when Liam turned up on Tuesday. That's all they needed."

Cooper's jaw tightened. "Did he give you a name?"

"Yeah. Kenici," Ethan said. "Apparently works for the Yakuza. Dave gave me a number too. I want you to track down this guy. Find out where he is and let me know. I'll meet you there. I want to be in on the questioning."

Rusty exchanged a glance with Cooper. "I think we all want to be there for that chat."

Ethan's voice hardened. "If he's got answers, I'm getting them."

Rusty nodded, his expression grim. "Alright. I'll start digging."

Cooper frowned. "How much did Dave owe?"

"He said way more than he could ever pay back, so I'm going with a lot. What are you thinking?" Ethan asked.

"I'm thinking that's a helluva debt to forgive for one small boy."

Ethan cocked his head, letting that thought percolate. Cooper was not wrong. A small boy was worth a lot to certain people for reasons that Ethan did not want to dwell on, but the Yakuza wouldn't forgive a debt over him. They would just get another kid.

"You're right. That is an interesting angle." Ethan shook his head. "Why are they willing to forgive a large debt in exchange for Liam?"

"No idea," Rusty responded, "but I think we need to find out. If we figure out that mystery, I think it will go a long way toward finding Liam."

Before they could continue, Bellamy's voice cut through the feed. He leaned into the frame, his blue eyes sharp with focus. "I tracked the SUV for a few blocks after it left the school. Traffic cameras caught it heading south, but then it turned onto a back road with no coverage. I've got nothing after that."

Ethan clenched his fists, frustration simmering just beneath the surface. "Damn it. Keep looking. If there's even a chance of picking up their trail, I need to know."

"Understood," Bellamy said.

Rusty cleared his throat. "Any update on Liam's phone?"

Cooper shook his head. "Not yet. Nova's still arguing with the phone company. They're stalling because Jackson's out of town, and we don't have a warrant."

The bathroom door creaked open, and Brooklyn stepped into the hallway, her hair damp and curling around her shoulders. She wore a light gray sweatshirt and jeans, her face scrubbed clean but still pale. Her eyes locked on Ethan as she overheard the last part of the conversation.

"Jackson?" she asked, her voice wary.

Ethan turned toward her. "Yeah. The company's dragging their feet without him to expedite things."

Brooklyn's lips pressed into a thin line. "I'll call him," she said firmly. "I've...I've been putting it off, but he needs to know what's happening."

"Brooklyn..." Ethan started, his voice softening.

But she held up a hand, cutting him off. "He's Liam's father. He deserves to know

that I failed him and Liam.” Her voice wavered slightly but held firm.

Ethan said nothing, watching as she grabbed her phone and moved to the kitchen, her voice low as she began the call. There was nothing he could say or do that would make that call any easier, which broke his heart. She would blame herself for this even though it wasn’t her fault. She’d done everything right. He turned back to the screen, his expression hardening once more.

“We’ve got to move fast,” he said. “The longer we wait, the colder this trail gets.”

Cooper, Rusty, and Bellamy all nodded grimly. “We’ll keep you updated,” Cooper said. “Hang in there.”

The call ended, and Ethan slouched against the couch cushions, scrubbing a hand over his face. Mojo nudged his leg, his warm brown eyes watching him intently. “Good boy,” Ethan murmured, rubbing behind the dog’s ears. Mojo’s steady presence was a small comfort in the chaos.

Brooklyn reappeared moments later, her phone clutched tightly in her hand. “He’s on his way back,” she said. “And I told him to call and talk to Nova so he can authorize the trace. Hopefully, that will expedite things.

Ethan stood. “Good. That’ll help. Did he say how long he’ll be?”

“Considering the time difference and the flights, I’m guessing he won’t be here until Sunday,” she said, her voice wavering as she sank into the armchair. “Ethan, what if...”

He sat on the coffee table across from her and grabbed the arms of her chair. “Don’t go there,” he said firmly. “We’re going to find him, Brooklyn. You have my word.”

Her eyes filled with tears, but she nodded, taking a shaky breath. “Okay.”

The room fell silent except for the faint ticking of the wall clock. Ethan’s mind churned with plans and contingencies. They had leads, but every moment felt like an eternity. He couldn’t let himself dwell on the worst-case scenario—not yet.

Brooklyn’s voice broke the silence. “Ethan...” she exhaled heavily. “Thank you. For everything.”

He met her gaze, the intensity in his eyes unwavering. “You don’t have to thank me. We’re in this together.”

She managed a faint smile, her fingers twisting the hem of her sweatshirt. “I just... I don’t know what I’d do without you...and your team,” she stammered.

“You won’t have to find out,” he said simply.

The weight of his words hung between them, unspoken emotions simmering beneath the surface. But before either could say more, Mojo’s ears perked up, and he let out a soft bark, drawing their attention back to the task at hand.

CHAPTER 17

Brooklyn's phone vibrated angrily on the kitchen counter, slicing through the tense silence that had blanketed the room after Mojo's bark. She snatched it up, heart pounding. The number on the screen was unrecognizable, a long string of digits that sent a shiver racing down her spine.

Ethan looked up sharply from where he leaned against the edge of the counter, arms crossed. His eyes narrowed. "Answer it," he said in a low voice. "Put it on speaker."

She did as she was told, gripping the phone tightly. "Hello?"

There was a pause. Then, a distorted voice crackled through the line, robotic and hollow, sending a chill curling around her ribs.

"Brooklyn Alexander" the voice rasped. "We have Liam."

Her breath caught, and she clutched the edge of the counter to steady herself. "Where is he? Who is this?"

The voice didn't falter. "That's not important. What matters is what you do next."

Brooklyn glanced at Ethan, her expression pleading. He immediately moved closer, his body a steady wall of strength at her side. She set the phone on the counter between them. Ethan started to text like a madman on his own cell.

"What do you want?" she demanded, voice trembling despite her effort to sound

calm.

The voice was cold, merciless. “A USB drive. Liam had it, and now it’s missing. You have until midnight to find it.”

Ethan straightened, his jaw tightening as his gaze darted to her.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Brooklyn said, forcing steel into her voice. “What USB drive? What’s on it?”

“It doesn’t matter,” the person snapped. “Liam had it, and it’s not on him now, which means it’s your problem. You have until midnight. No cops. If you call them, Liam’s blood is on your hands.”

Brooklyn’s chest constricted, each word tightening like a vise around her ribs. Ethan’s eyes were locked on the phone, his body taut with restrained fury.

“Wait,” she pleaded. “How do I even know Liam’s alive?”

There was a brief pause, followed by a muffled, agonized groan. Her stomach twisted.

“That’s all you get,” the voice said. “Midnight. We’ll call again with instructions. Don’t disappoint us.”

Before Brooklyn could respond, the line went dead. She stared at the phone, her pulse hammering in her ears.

“Ethan,” she whispered, her voice cracking.

“I had Bellamy trying to trace the call.” He was already dialing his teammate.

“Anything?”

Brooklyn stared at Ethan, but he shook his head. “It’s a burner phone. They pinged off two cell towers, so we know they were in Kona, but we needed a third tower to triangulate the call.”

How could this be happening? She sucked in a deep breath and tried to keep from screaming. She started pacing the length of the kitchen while Ethan spoke rapidly into the phone. Her mind raced, replaying the distorted voice, the veiled threats, the horrifying groan that confirmed Liam’s suffering. Where was the USB drive? She’d never heard Liam mention anything about it, but clearly, it was valuable enough to someone to threaten his life.

Ethan grabbed her phone and then did something to his phone with hers next to it. “I’m cloning your phone,” he explained. “Mine is already linked to the comms center. We’ll be able to track any incoming calls automatically now, and we’ll be able to track you.” Ethan said, lowering the phone. He was calm, tension etched deep grooves into his face, the barely contained rage simmering beneath the surface.

“I recorded the call and sent Rusty the file. They’re going to work on it, but the distortion makes it tricky. It could take a while.”

“Tricky? A while?” she snapped, her voice rising. “We don’t have time for ‘a while’, Ethan. Liam doesn’t have time.”

“I know,” Ethan said sharply. His voice softened as he stepped closer. “But we’re not going to get anywhere if we panic. Let’s focus on what we do know.”

She forced herself to nod, even though her chest felt like it might implode. “Liam never mentioned a USB drive.”

Ethan's brows knitted together. "But they said he had it. They seemed very sure. The Yakuza aren't going to risk kidnapping a kid if they weren't absolutely sure he had what they wanted."

Her mind raced, sifting through every conversation, every moment she'd shared with Liam. Her frustration mounted as nothing stood out. "I don't know. He never said anything. He didn't act any differently."

"Which means we need to retrace his steps," Ethan said. "They tried to grab him Tuesday and we think, my team and I, that it wasn't planned. Like they suddenly discovered that Liam had the USB drive that day and made a grab for him to stop things from escalating very quickly."

Brooklyn frowned. Her brain was buzzing. Ethan was trying to tell her something, but she struggled to pick up on it. "What are you thinking?"

"I think Liam must have gotten the USB drive on Monday, possibly Sunday but that might be a bit far out."

"Uh..." Think, Brooklyn, think .

"Okay," Ethan said as he went over and filled the kettle.

"Why are you making tea? I don't want tea!"

Ethan turned the burner on. "We're going to take this step by step. If we panic now, we can miss something or make a mistake. We have to focus." He pointed to the stool at the breakfast bar. "Take a seat and take a few deep breaths. Then I want you to think back and see if you can remember what Liam and his father did this past weekend."

Brooklyn sat down and drummed her fingers on the counter. This wasn't helping. She started to rise again but Ethan shook his head. "Deep breaths."

She clamped her jaws shut, settled back on the stool, and closed her eyes. She took long, slow breaths and tried to calm her mind. Ethan was right. Panicking wouldn't help anything. She opened her eyes as he set a cup of tea down on the counter in front of her. She wrapped her hands around the mug to warm her chilly fingers. Her body felt frozen in place.

"Last week," Ethan prompted.

Brooklyn closed her eyes again. "I was with Liam and Jackson on Saturday. We surfed in the morning and then went for a drive to Hilo in the afternoon. We ordered pizza and watched a movie Saturday night." She opened her eyes. Normally, she would be embarrassed to admit she'd spent Saturday night with her brother and nephew, but they were well beyond that now. She didn't care about anything except getting Liam back.

"Could someone have given Liam a USB drive on Saturday?" Ethan asked.

Brooklyn took a sip of her tea and pondered that question. "No," she said finally, "I don't see how it could have happened without me or his father seeing it and we would have asked questions."

"Okay. What about Sunday?"

"Liam and Jackson stayed home to work on the science fair project. They worked on it all day. In fact, I remember my brother saying they hadn't left the house all day and he needed to get a few things before his trip on Monday, but he was too tired to do it then. He decided he would do it after he dropped Liam off at school the next day."

Ethan nodded. “Monday. Do you know what Liam did?”

She shrugged. “Went to school.”

“Anything else?” Ethan prompted.

She froze. Locking gazes with Ethan she said, “He went to Dave’s Café after school to play video games with the boys.”

Ethan nodded. “How do they get to the cafe?”

“Walk,” she supplied. “But if anyone had given Liam anything during the walk, the other boys would have said something. They were all there, even Ren on Monday.”

“Liam went to the café. Then what happened?”

“My brother picked him up and they went home, as far as I know. They ordered in and Jackson packed while Liam did his homework. I dropped by that evening to say goodbye to my brother and get any last minute instructions. My brother dropped Liam at school on Tuesday and I picked him up at the café and, well, you know the rest.”

She crossed her arms over her chest as if that could hold in her anxiety. “Shouldn’t we be looking for the USB stick? You said they wouldn’t have grabbed Liam if they weren’t sure he had it.”

Ethan’s phone rang. He answered it and immediately put it on speaker. “Rusty, any news?”

“Just searched the house. Nothing. I found a few USB drives, but all in the father’s office. None of which would be of any interest to the Yakuza.”

“Wait,” Brooklyn said as she stared at Ethan, “Is he at my brother’s place? Are you at Jackson’s?” she demanded.

“Yeah,” Rusty confirmed. “No joy though. I’ve been through Liam’s room and all the closets. He doesn’t have any hidey-holes, at least none I could find.”

“Hidey-holes?” Brooklyn struggled to keep her anger at bay. “Liam is a good kid.”

“Yes, ma’am, he is. But he’s also almost a teenager. I searched, and even though I couldn’t find a special hiding spot, that doesn’t mean he doesn’t have one. Is there anywhere he goes on a regular basis that he might hide something he didn’t want anyone to see?”

“Liam’s not like that,” she protested.

“Just suppose for a minute he was, where would he hide things?” Ethan asked.

Brooklyn wanted to keep protesting but she knew it was useless. They weren’t trying to smear Liam’s character although that is what it felt like. They were trying to help him, she reminded herself.

“If he was trying to hide something, he would probably hide it here. I never go into his room. I always tell him it’s his space and as long as he keeps it clean, I’ll only vacuum and change the sheets.”

“We’ll search his room here. Rusty, head over to Dave’s Café and see if you can turn up anything over there, okay? That’s the only other place Liam might have encountered someone who could have given him the drive.”

“Will do.” Rusty clicked off the call.

Brooklyn bit her lip as a thought occurred to her. “You don’t think that Liam could have hacked into something, do you? Like stumbled onto something online and the Yakuza found out?”

Ethan shook his head. “He’s a bright kid but the conversations we had while putting up the cameras tell me that even though he is smart, he’s not a hacker. He didn’t create the USB drive. Whatever is on it, it must have come from someone else.” Ethan straightened. “We have to search his room.”

Brooklyn rose slowly. “It seems like such an invasion of privacy.” The thought of pawing over Liam’s stuff was making her ill.

“We’re doing this to save Liam. Trust me he’s not going to care if you look at his things. Do you want me to do it on my own?”

“No,” she said shaking her head. “Somehow that would almost be worse.”

Ethan nodded. “Let’s get to it. Remember a USB drive is small and can be hidden in all kinds of ways. Be thorough. We don’t have time to make a mistake.”

As if she needed reminding of this. She was very well aware that Liam’s life was hanging in the balance. If she didn’t manage to save him, there would be no hope of saving herself. She would never get over it. Never.

CHAPTER 18

Brooklyn sat back on her heels, her breath ragged. “It’s not here. We’ve been over his room twice.” Frustration seeped into every word.

Ethan leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed, his face grim. He’d searched the spare room and the kitchen while she went over the bedroom again. Still, it wasn’t here.

“Where could it be?” she demanded, her voice cracking under the weight of rising anxiety. Glancing at Liam’s alarm clock she said, “Only five hours left. We’re running out of time.”

Ethan moved to her side and gently pulled her to her feet. “Don’t lose it now. We’re going to find Liam. I promise.” His voice was steady, but guilt gnawed at him. He’d promised to keep the boy safe and now look where they were. She had every right to hurl those words back at him, but she didn’t. That only made the guilt worse.

He tugged her into his arms, holding her tightly. He wanted to say it was for her, but the truth was, it was more for him. He needed the connection, the reassurance that he was still capable of comforting someone when words no longer sufficed.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, shattering the moment. He pulled it out and answered immediately, then switched to speaker. “Bellamy, what have you got?”

“Nothing.” Bellamy’s voice was filled with disgust. “I’ve scoured every camera, but the SUV just doesn’t show up anywhere. I’ve been mapping the area, and I think they

took a series of back roads. They could've gone all the way into the Pu'u Wa'awa'a Forest Preserve without passing another camera."

Ethan tightened his grip on the phone, swallowing the curse that threatened to escape. Bad news after bad news.

Cooper's voice came through the line next. "Nova finally pulled the cell phone records. Nothing strange. Liam's texts are all with his gaming friends, his dad, or Brooklyn. Same with the calls—no unexpected contacts."

"Oh my God," Brooklyn whispered, her hands pressing against her face. "How can we not find anything?"

"Did you locate Kenici?" Ethan asked, clinging to the hope that this lead might still yield answers.

"Yeah," Cooper replied, his tone grim. "He's dead. Cops in Hilo found his body in an alley an hour ago. We only know because Nova put out a BOLO. Another dead end."

Brooklyn leaned heavily against the wall, threading her fingers through her hair, a small, pained sob escaped. She'd tried calling her brother earlier, but his phone had been off, telling Ethan he'd managed to catch a flight. Ethan's heart broke for her; she was facing this nightmare without the one person who might truly understand. And Jackson must be terrified as well.

"I take it you found nothing on your end?" Bellamy said, though his tone suggested he already knew the answer.

"No luck," Ethan admitted. He exhaled, trying to maintain his composure. "We need to figure out a plan for the exchange."

“Already working on it,” Rusty cut in. “I’ve got the equipment prepped, and I’ll be ready when the call comes in.”

“But how can we do the exchange if we don’t have the USB?” Brooklyn’s outburst crackled with desperation.

Ethan squeezed her shoulder gently. “We’ll go to the exchange regardless and do whatever it takes to get Liam back.”

Rusty interjected, “We’ve still got time. Is there anywhere else Liam’s been in the last few days? I checked the café, but there’s nowhere there he could’ve hidden it. Dave’s a mess, by the way. I told him to get out of town.”

Brooklyn turned to him sharply. “Why should he get to leave when Liam is still missing?”

Ethan met her gaze evenly. “Because the Yakuza are cleaning up loose ends. The guys in prison, Kenici—anyone connected to this is being eliminated. If Dave stays, they’ll kill him too.”

Her lips trembled before she bit down on them, anger flaring in her eyes. “I could kill Dave myself right now, but I don’t actually want him dead. You’re right; it’s better if he leaves.”

Brooklyn’s exhaustion was palpable as she sighed. “We’ve gone over everywhere Liam’s been. I even called Ren’s family, but he’s been sick at home since Monday. Other than school, Liam doesn’t go anywhere.”

“That’s it,” Ethan muttered, the realization hitting him like a brick.

Brooklyn blinked at him, her voice wary. “What’s it?”

“School,” Ethan said, his tone sharpening. “It’s the one place we haven’t checked. He has a locker, doesn’t he?”

She nodded slowly.

“Good. Let’s go.” He grabbed his keys, ushering her toward the door. Mojo, sensing the urgency, darted around their feet excitedly.

“We’re heading to the school,” Ethan said into the phone. “Keep prepping for the exchange and cross your fingers.” He hung up and followed Brooklyn out to his truck.

The drive to the school was silent and tense. Ethan wanted to reassure her, but there was nothing left to say. Without the USB, the odds of getting Liam back were slim. This wasn’t a custody dispute; this was organized crime. Even with the USB, the chances were fifty-fifty at best. Without it... he didn’t dare finish the thought.

When they arrived, Hale waited by the school entrance, his expression serious. Ethan had called the man to let him know that they were on the way and he appreciated the man’s lack of small talk.

“I’ll take you to Liam’s locker.” Hale led them into the school.

Two minutes later, Brooklyn rifled through the contents of Liam’s locker while Ethan stood nearby, scanning for any sign of a clue. After searching twice, she slammed the door shut.

“It’s not here,” she said, her voice shaking. “Where else could he have hidden it?”

Hale hesitated. “It’s a big school, Ms. Alexander. There are plenty of places a clever kid could hide something. We’re talking days of video footage to review, and with

the science fair tomorrow, it's chaos around here."

Brooklyn swayed, and Ethan immediately steadied her, his arm wrapping protectively around her. "Off the top of your head, can you think of anywhere specific?"

Hale shook his head. "Maybe the library?" He gestured for them to follow. "I'll grab the keys to unlock it."

As they walked past the gym, Brooklyn stopped, her gaze drawn to the activity inside. A few maintenance workers were setting up tables under bright overhead lights. In the morning, students and families would be allowed to come in and put the finishing touches on their projects.

"Can I see Liam's science fair project?" she asked, turning to Hale.

He nodded. "Sure. I'll meet you in there."

Brooklyn stepped into the gym, her eyes scanning the rows of projects. Ethan followed her, and within minutes, they found Liam's setup. He'd left his sweatshirt on the back of the chair and Brooklyn had recognized it right away. She picked it up and hugged it.

"Impressive." Ethan genuinely meant it. "He really put in a lot of effort."

The display featured a detailed trifold board explaining tsunami impacts, accompanied by a scale model of one side of the Big Island. Tiny houses and cars were glued to the terrain, with a switch on the table to simulate the effects.

Brooklyn put the sweatshirt over her shoulder and then ran her fingers over the model, her expression softening. "He worked so hard on this. He wanted to show how a tsunami would affect us." She pointed to the loose placement of the cars and

houses. "When the water hits, they're all washed away."

She frowned suddenly, her fingers hovering over a small black sedan. "That car... I don't remember seeing it before. He had a Jeep, a sports car, and a SUV. This one's new."

She plucked the sedan from the model and turned it over. "It's different from the others."

Ethan took it from her, examining it closely, noting a seam where there shouldn't have been one. Gently, he tugged at it, and the front of the car slid off, revealing a USB drive nestled inside.

Relief and dread warred in his chest. "This is it."

Brooklyn stared at the drive in his hand, her expression a mix of disbelief and hope. "Oh my God, now what do we do?"

"We head to the Brotherhood Ranch. We need to know what the hell is on this thing that triggers kidnapping a young boy."

Twenty minutes later, they walked into the comms center. Rusty, Bellamy, and Cooper were all waiting.

"Here," Ethan said as he handed the thumb drive to Bellamy. Bellamy immediately inserted the drive into a desktop computer that sat alone on a table in the corner.

"Brooklyn, how are you holding up?" Rusty asked.

"Better now that we have the USB drive."

Ethan walked over and started a cup of tea for Brooklyn, then poured himself a cup of coffee. The next part was going to be the hardest, waiting for the call.

"What's he doing?" Brooklyn asked, pointing to Bellamy.

Ethan handed her the tea. "He's trying to determine the drive's contents. That's a standalone computer, not hooked up to anything. We can't just access a drive we know nothing about. If we do, we risk setting a virus loose in the entire system. We need to make sure it's safe first, then we can move it to our system and go from there."

"I understand," she said but still went to stand behind Bellamy.

Rusty came over to Ethan and dropped his voice. "Are you going to let her go to the exchange?"

Ethan's gut churned. He'd been grappling with that exact question since they found the USB. "I don't want to, but I'm not sure I can stop her."

Rusty nodded once. "Okay. I'll shift some things so we've got her covered as well."

"You worked up that detailed of a plan? We don't even know where the exchange is going to take place yet."

Cooper came over, coffee in hand. "We know they won't do it in a public place because it's after midnight. Odds are it will be somewhere remote with limited access. They'll want control, so they won't give us much time to get there. I'm thinking they'll tell Brooklyn she has twenty to thirty minutes to arrive—tops. They'll already be in position."

"You're thinking of hiding in the truck," Ethan said, cutting in.

Rusty nodded. "Yeah, you know the drill. You take a Brotherhood SUV. We'll hide Rusty in the back and have a backup vehicle as close as we can. The other two will leave the second vehicle and hike in on foot as quickly as possible."

Cooper took a sip of coffee. "Bellamy and I will be in the second vehicle. Depending on the setup, we'll decide on bringing the dogs. They might come in handy."

Ethan nodded. "I'll bring Mojo with me. They'll expect that. He's always with me."

"Sounds good."

Bellamy cursed under his breath.

"What is it?" Brooklyn demanded.

"This thing has serious encryption software. There's no way I can break through it in"—he glanced at his watch—"less than three hours."

Ethan checked his own watch. It was after nine. He was surprised at how late it had gotten and damn grateful that the others were already putting a plan in place. He glanced over at Brooklyn. Her face was ashen, and she held her teacup in a death grip.

He moved over to stand beside her. "Brooklyn, it's late. You should probably?—"

"I'm not leaving," she blurted out.

He squeezed her shoulder. "I'm not asking you to leave. I just want you to get something to eat. I don't want you out there and suddenly lightheaded."

She stared at him. "You're going to let me go to the exchange?"

"Do you want to go?" he asked. Had he misread her? Did she not want to be there?

Relief blossomed on her face. "No—I mean, yes, I want to go. I just thought I was going to have to convince you, that's all."

"Honey, he's your nephew. As much as I'd like to keep you out of harm's way, I've seen you with Liam, and I know how much you love him. I know you have to be there for him."

She set her cup aside before wrapping her arms around him. "Thank you," she whispered.

"Why don't you go with Cooper to get something to eat? There's some food in the kitchen. I'm going to speak to the guys for a second and then I'll check on you."

Cooper added, "I think there's some Chinese food from earlier tonight, or some sandwich fixings, if you'd prefer."

After a brief hesitation, she followed Cooper to the kitchen.

Ethan turned back to Bellamy as Rusty came to stand beside them. "What do you think?" Ethan asked.

"I think I'm going to have to call in the big guns. I'm good, but this is above my pay grade. I'm not sure Hawk has anyone here at this level, but I'm guessing he knows someone who can handle it."

Rusty swore. "It would've been nice to know what all this is about."

"Yeah," Ethan agreed, "but that's not the end goal. The end goal is to get Liam back. We just need this thumb drive for the exchange. Everything else is secondary."

Bellamy nodded. "I've made a copy here. There aren't any obvious viruses. I'll transfer it to one of the computers and copy the file again. I'll email it to Hawk and ask for help. Hopefully, he knows someone who can break this encryption. You never know—this information might be useful."

No matter how true that statement was, he just didn't care. Right now, it was all about getting Liam back. He only prayed the kidnappers played fair. There was no way to be sure, and he didn't want to deal with Brooklyn if Liam didn't come home tonight. The boy was her whole world and hurting her like that would shatter his own.

CHAPTER 19

Brooklyn moved the food around her plate. She had no appetite, and her stomach was too full of screaming pterodactyls to really think about putting anything else in it. She wasn't worried about getting lightheaded from lack of food, but she was worried about eating and then puking her guts up later if things didn't go well.

She tried to squash the panic. Negative thoughts wouldn't help Liam, and they wouldn't help her. She needed to think positively and trust Ethan and his team. She took a sip of her tepid tea, grimaced, and set the cup down.

Slumping in her chair, she ran her hands down over her face and then glanced at her watch. Not long now. Time had dragged, but now, suddenly, it sped up.

"How are you doing?" Ethan asked as he put a new cup of tea down in front of her. He glanced at her plate but didn't admonish her for not eating.

"I'm..." She had no idea how to answer that question.

Ethan sat across from her. "It was a stupid question. I know how you are." He reached over and squeezed her hand. "You will get through this. We'll get Liam back and you two will move past this."

"Promise?" she asked but then waved him off. "That wasn't fair. I know you can't promise to get Liam back safely."

"I will do everything in my power to make that happen. To keep both of you safe."

Ethan looked so serious, so solemn that her heart squeezed a bit more. She was falling for this man, no question. He had done all the right things through this crisis. He'd been there for her at every turn. Said and did all the right things to make her feel safe. She'd been so mean to him, thinking he had ghosted her when he had no memory of their night together. Guilt washed over her for how she treated him. She needed to apologize. Anything could happen tonight. Anything. She needed to clear the air between her and Ethan.

Leaning forward in her chair, Brooklyn started. "Ethan, I want to apologize to you."

Ethan frowned. "What for? You've done nothing wrong."

"I've been treating you...badly up until...this crisis, and that's not fair to you. Even though I was an utter bitch, you stepped up and have done everything possible to help me and Liam. I owe you everything."

He shook his head. "You owe me nothing. I promised you I'd protect Liam, and they still managed to grab him. That's on me. If anything, I owe you an apology."

She shook her head. "There's no way you could've known they would grab him at school. That is on the school and quite frankly, Liam. As much as I hate to admit it, he got into that SUV willingly. It's not his fault, he's just a kid, but there's no way for you to anticipate that he might do something like that."

She cleared her throat. "I need to tell you something though. The reason I was so cold to you, so bitchy is...I thought you ghosted me."

The shrill sound of her cell phone ringing rent the air. It was as if all the oxygen was magically sucked out of the room.

Cooper, Bellamy, and Rusty rushed into the kitchen area, their expressions grim. The

air was thick with tension. Ethan gave Brooklyn's hand a reassuring squeeze before pressing the button to put the call on speaker. The faint crackle of static filled the space, each second stretching unbearably long.

"Hello?" Brooklyn's voice wavered, her throat tightening with fear.

"You have the USB drive?" The voice on the other end was so distorted and emotionless it sent an icy shiver down her spine.

"Yes."

"Bring it to the Pu'u O Umi Nature Preserve. Twelve-thirty."

Brooklyn's pulse pounded. "That's more than ten thousand acres!" she burst out, frustration laced with fear.

"I'll send you coordinates." The voice remained eerily calm, unaffected by her panic. "Come alone. No cops. And you have to be the one who delivers the USB. Your boyfriend can drive but you have to be there."

Brooklyn swallowed hard, her fingers trembling as she clenched Ethan's hand. "I want to talk to Liam," she demanded, her tone turning steely. "I'm not coming unless I know he's okay."

Silence stretched; suffocating and heavy. Then, a small voice broke through the static.

"Aunt Brooklyn?"

Brooklyn gasped, her breath catching in her throat. "Liam! Are you okay? We're coming to get you, buddy."

There was no response. Just dead air.

Brooklyn sat frozen, the phone still clutched in her grip. The sudden, deafening silence rang louder than the call itself. The room seemed to close in around her, the walls pressing against the fear clawing at her chest.

“They cut the call,” Ethan muttered, his jaw tightening.

Brooklyn sucked in a shaky breath, blinking hard to push back the rising panic. They had a location, but no guarantees. Liam had sounded scared, vulnerable. And now, with no way to reach him, they were walking straight into the unknown.

“We’re running out of time,” Rusty said, his voice grim. “We need to move.”

Brooklyn nodded, forcing down the panic. They had no choice. They had to go. They had to get Liam back. No matter what it took.

CHAPTER 20

Ethan adjusted the tactical vest over his shoulders, the weight grounding him as he surveyed the room. The comms center buzzed with restless energy. Screens flickered with satellite imagery of the Pu'u O Umi Nature Preserve coordinates the kidnappers had sent. Weapons were checked and rechecked, tension clogged the air.

Cooper leaned against a desk, arms crossed, eyes dark with focus. Bellamy sat at a nearby terminal, double-checking radio frequencies. Rusty was by the weapons locker, securing his gear with methodical precision. Brooklyn stood off to the side, gripping her arms, shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

“We’re taking the dogs,” Ethan announced, his voice cutting through the tense quiet. “Mojo’s coming with Brooklyn and me in the SUV. Coop, you and Bellamy take Soda, Whiskey, and Tucker.”

Cooper nodded. “No problem.”

Bellamy glanced up from his screen. “Coop and I will set up the second vehicle back in the trees. We’ll approach on foot as soon as you give the go.”

Ethan gave a sharp nod. “Good. We can’t afford to be seen too early. They’ll be on edge, and if they sense a setup, they’ll bolt—or worse.”

Rusty holstered his sidearm and turned to Brooklyn. “You sure you’re up for this?”

Brooklyn lifted her chin, but Ethan saw the nervous flicker in her eyes. “What choice

do I have.”

He stepped toward her, lowering his voice. “You do exactly as I say, Brooklyn. No hesitation. No second-guessing.”

She swallowed hard and nodded. “Okay.”

“Say it.”

“I’ll do exactly as you say,” she whispered, her voice unsteady.

Ethan studied her for a moment before pulling her into a quick hug. He felt the tension in her body, the way her fingers curled slightly into his back before she pulled away. “You’re going to be fine,” he murmured.

She exhaled shakily. “I hope so.”

Ethan let his hand linger on her arm for a second longer before stepping back. He glanced around at the others. “We move in ten.”

Brooklyn hesitated, her gaze flicking to the floor. Ethan caught the movement, something unspoken hanging between them.

“We need to talk,” he said quietly. “After this.”

Brooklyn’s lips parted slightly, “I know.”

Ethan clenched his jaw. He wasn’t going to let her slip away this time. Before all this started, she had been cold to him—distant in a way that gnawed at him. She’d started to tell him why and then stopped when the kidnappers called. But the second Liam was safe, he damn well intended to find out why.

Ethan wrestled with the steering wheel as the SUV rumbled down the rutted dirt path leading into Pu'u O Umi Nature Preserve. Darkness pressed in around them, broken only by the glow of the headlights cutting through the humid night air. The spring breeze was scented with damp earth and salt, but the unease in Ethan's gut overpowered any appreciation of the island's beauty.

Beside him, Brooklyn sat stiffly, one hand clenched around Mojo's harness. The dog whined softly, as though affected by the tension rolling through the cab. The dashboard clock read twelve twenty-eight a.m. They were right on time, yet every instinct in Ethan screamed that this was a mistake. He did a comms check. Everyone responded. They were good to go.

Ethan slowed the SUV as they entered a small clearing. Gravel crunched beneath the tires. The headlights illuminated a white van already there, its rear doors closed tight like a vault. Two men stood in front of it, their arms crossed, tattoos snaking up their forearms and disappearing beneath their sleeves. The stark contrast of ink against their skin was made more menacing under the artificial glow of the lights. Their expressions were unreadable, but their stance radiated controlled menace.

"Those aren't the guys from before. The ones that tried to grab Liam," Brooklyn said in a quiet voice.

Confirmation . Jaw tightening, Ethan put the SUV in park. He glanced at Brooklyn. "Stay close. No sudden moves."

Brooklyn nodded, her jaw set, eyes locked on the men as she and Ethan climbed out of the vehicle. Mojo's ears pricked forward, his body a tense coil of restrained energy.

Ethan quietly hissed, "Go, go, go," giving Bellamy and Cooper the signal to head to his location.

One of the men stepped forward, his voice thick with a Japanese accent. "You have it?"

Ethan held up the small USB drive, letting the light catch on its metallic surface. "Where's Liam?"

The second man, slightly shorter but broader, gave a slow, deliberate shake of his head. "We confirm the drive first. Then you get the boy."

Brooklyn tensed beside him. "That wasn't the deal."

The taller man smirked, his teeth flashing in the dim light. "Deals change. Hand it over."

Ethan exhaled slowly, his muscles coiled with tension. "Not until we see Liam. As you said, deals change."

The shorter man's expression darkened, his fingers twitching toward his waist. "That is not how this works."

A muscle in Ethan's jaw twitched. "Then it doesn't work at all. We walk, and you get nothing." Brooklyn gasped next to him, but he refused to look at her. If he did, she might say something or do something that would risk everything. He willed her to stay silent.

For a moment, silence stretched between them, thick and suffocating. The night was heavy, the sky moonless, the dim starlight doing little to illuminate the clearing. A distant rustling in the trees sent a prickle down Ethan's spine, his senses sharpening. Was that Cooper and Bellamy, or did these guys have reinforcements?

Then, the taller man sighed dramatically, as if Ethan had personally inconvenienced

him. "I was hoping you'd be smarter than this."

He moved fast—too fast. His hand darted inside his jacket revealing the unmistakable glint of metal in the headlights.

Ethan reacted instinctively, surging forward and shoving Brooklyn down as the crack of a gunshot split the air.

Brooklyn grunted as she hit the ground hard beneath him. Mojo barked wildly, his growls filling the space between gunshots. Another shot rang out, but this time, it wasn't from the Yakuza.

Rusty.

Ethan twisted, still shielding Brooklyn as Rusty emerged from the back of the SUV, his gun raised. The first thug staggered backward with a sharp cry before crumpling to the dirt, while the second recoiled, clutching his side. Rusty didn't hesitate. Another shot and the man collapsed.

Silence fell, thick and unnatural. "Ethan, Rusty," Cooper's voice rang in his ear. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," Rusty answered. "All good."

Ethan pushed up, his heart pounding as he turned to Brooklyn. "Are you okay?"

She nodded, her breath shaky, her fingers digging into the gravel beneath her. "Yeah."

Hackles raised, Mojo stood rigid beside her, the Malinois's teeth bared in a silent warning to any lingering threat. Ethan turned his attention to the van, the sick feeling

in his gut deepening.

He yanked open the rear doors.

Empty.

Brooklyn sucked in a sharp breath. "No. No, no, no. Where is he?"

Ethan swore under his breath, stepping back as reality crashed down on them. "They played us. He was never here."

Rusty wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, his eyes narrowing. "Then where the hell is Liam?"

The only response was the hollow wind whispering through the trees, a cruel reminder of just how alone they were.

CHAPTER 21

“Where could he be? Where could they have him?” Brooklyn demanded. Breath stuttered out of her fast and harsh. Too fast. Blood seeped down her cheek from when she hit the ground. She went towards the two men on the ground, but Ethan stopped her. “Brooklyn, let me handle this.”

“Where is he?” she yelled.

Ethan held her and signaled to Cooper, who came and gripped her arms. “No,” she yelled. “I want to talk to them.” She shook Cooper off and then tried to shake Ethan off, but he grabbed her by both shoulders.

“Let me handle this. Cooper is going to take you to the truck and examine the cut on your face, okay? You don’t want Liam to see you this way. It will scare him. He wasn’t above begging for her cooperation. “Please, honey. Go with Cooper.”

She put her hand to her face and then stared at the blood on her fingers. She immediately quieted and allowed Cooper to lead her away.

Ethan walked over to where the two thugs lay on the ground. The shorter guy was dead, no question, but the taller guy still breathed. Ethan squatted next to him. The man’s gaze followed Ethan.

“Where’s the boy?” Ethan asked.

The man blinked but said nothing. Blood pooled underneath him. Clearly, he didn’t

have much time left. They hadn't bothered to call an ambulance. They wouldn't make it in time. Ethan knew it but he hoped the guy didn't.

"I'll call an ambulance. I'll get you help but you've got to tell me where the boy is."

The man stared at him and then gave a weak smile. "Not going to make it..." he said as blood came out of the corner of his mouth.

Ethan's stomach dropped. He had no bargaining chip. "Tell me where the boy is."

The man opened his mouth again, but no sound came out.

"Tell me," Ethan demanded. "Do you have the boy? You're gonna die out here because your boss sent you without the proper backup. It's on them. You are gonna leave your family in the lurch because of your boss. Why protect him? You're gonna die." Ethan held the other man's gaze. "Where is Liam?"

The man closed his eyes, which made Ethan's heart clench, but then opened them again. His lips upturned at the corners as if he hadn't a care in the world. Maybe he didn't anymore.

"What does it matter now if you tell me? You're already dead. No one can touch you." But she's suffering," He pointed to Brooklyn who was sitting in the front seat of the SUV, shock written across her features. Cooper dabbed her cheek with a cotton pad from the first aid kit. "Do one good deed before you leave this world. Where is the boy?"

The man's eyes flicked toward Brooklyn and then came back to Ethan. He opened his mouth. "Gone."

"Gone? What does that mean?" Ethan's heart hammered against his rib cage. He

dropped his voice. “Do you mean dead?”

The man’s breath hitched but he opened his mouth again. “No. Escaped. Out there...somewhere.” The man held Ethan’s gaze for a moment longer before his eyes turned vacant, no longer seeing anything, at least on earth.

Ethan stood. Rusty and Bellamy came over. “Did he tell you anything?” Bellamy asked.

“He said that Liam escaped. He’s somewhere in this park.”

Rusty rubbed his jaw. “Well shit, that’s better than dead, but it’s nighttime. There have to be over ten thousand acres to search. We need to call in backup and the authorities.”

Ethan nodded toward his truck. “Let’s look at the map.” They all walked back over to the truck and Ethan pulled out an iPad with the map of the preserve on it. He handed it to Bellamy and then went around the door to talk to Brooklyn.

Cooper applied some antibiotic ointment to the reddened scratch and then stepped out of the way.

Brooklyn’s eyes filled with unshed tears when she met his gaze.

He leaned in. “Hey,” he said as he gave her a hug. “Liam’s alive. He’s okay.”

She pulled away. “Is that what that man said? That Liam’s alive?” Her face filled with hope.

“He said that Liam escaped into the preserve.”

All the light in her face died. “But... how will we search thousands of acres... he’s only...” her voice barely above a whisper.

“Yes, but you see those four dogs behind you?” He pointed to the dogs who were lying in the dirt waiting for orders. “They are the best in the business. We’re gonna find Liam. They’re gonna help us.”

He gave her shoulders a squeeze and then went back to the front of the truck. “Cooper, call Nova and fill her in.”

“Way ahead of ya.” Cooper pointed to his phone. He was already talking with her.

Good, that meant the authorities were officially notified. They could get on with what they needed to do. Nova would run interference for them.

“There are a couple shacks in here. I come hiking sometimes,” Rusty said by way of explanation.

“Yeah,” agreed Bellamy. “I know the ones you mean.”

Rusty pointed to the map. “I think this is the most likely one for them to hold Liam in. It’s accessible by an old dirt road and it’s not too far from here. Makes it the most appealing.”

Bellamy nodded again. “I agree. The other one is too far into the rainforest for these guys.”

“Let’s go there and see if the dogs can pick up Liam’s scent.” Ethan grabbed the iPad and they all loaded into the SUV. They put the dogs in the back and headed toward the shack.

“We need something of Ethan’s, something for the dogs to get his scent from,” Cooper pointed out.

Ethan swore. They didn’t have anything and going to get something would just cause more delays.

“His sweatshirt,” Brooklyn said triumphantly. She pulled it out from behind her.

“Excellent,” Bellamy commented as Ethan braked in front of the shack.

“How do we know no one else is here?” Brooklyn said suddenly. “Could there be more Yakuza?”

“No. They are either out looking for Liam, which is highly unlikely, or if anyone else was here, they took off when Liam escaped. No one wants to be responsible for losing the kid.”

They all piled out and got the dogs out of the cargo space.

Cooper answered a call as Ethan went around to Mojo.

“Ethan, I’m gonna hang back so I can meet up with Nova. She wants Rusty there too since he was the shooter.”

The second Ethan let the dogs loose, Tucker and Mojo sniffed the air, their bodies tense, their instincts on high alert. The small, dilapidated shack before them looked as if it had been forgotten by time, its wooden walls rotting, paint long since peeled away. The single window was cracked, the frame splintered, and the door hung slightly ajar, swaying eerily in the humid night breeze. The scent of mildew and damp earth permeated the air, mingling with something far more acrid—fear, desperation, and sweat.

Ethan took a step forward, his gun clutched in both hands, as Mojo pushed inside first, his snout pressed to the floorboards. Brooklyn was right behind them, her breath coming in shallow gasps. She put her hand over her mouth as she looked around the ramshackle room. A battered cot sat in one corner, the thin mattress stained and sunken. Coils of rope lay discarded near the wall, remnants of Liam's captivity. Scraps of food—crushed crackers, a half-eaten granola bar—were strewn across the floor.

Brooklyn's fingers clenched into fists. They'd confirmed Liam had been here. Alone. Afraid. She swallowed convulsively as if to keep from being sick. Ethan focused on his dog, concentrating on what was happening. There would be time for emotion later.

Mojo let out a low whine before barking sharply, his tail stiff as he sniffed the thin blanket tossed carelessly on the cot. Tucker circled the room once more before both dogs turned sharply toward the back door, their noses to the ground. A deep growl rumbled from Mojo's throat. Relief created a thin thread of hope in Ethan. The dogs had caught the scent.

Mojo lunged for the door, his powerful body shoving it open. The rainforest beyond was dense, an inky labyrinth of towering ferns and twisted roots. The dampness clung to Ethan's skin, the scent of moss, decaying wood, and rain-soaked leaves cloying in his nostrils. The canopy overhead blocked any ambient starlight, casting eerie shadows that shifted with the wind.

"Go, Mojo," Ethan ordered urgently.

Mojo shot forward, Tucker right behind him, their paws barely making a sound as they navigated the uneven ground. Ethan and Bellamy stayed in a close formation, scanning the trees for any movement, their hands never straying far from their weapons. Brooklyn kept pace with them, but Ethan remained worried. It was so dark

and he was afraid if she took her eyes off him, she could get lost in the darkness.

The rainforest swallowed them, branches clawing at their clothes, roots threatening to trip them at every step. Sweat dripped down Ethan's back as they pushed deeper into the jungle, the dogs darting ahead, weaving through the foliage. Minutes stretched, each one a suffocating eternity in the rush to find Liam.

After what felt like forever, Mojo let out a loud, insistent bark.

Ethan tried to stop her, but Brooklyn sprinted forward. She broke through the foliage and stumbled into a small clearing. A strangled cry wrenched out of her throat.

Liam lay curled against the base of a thick tree, his small frame unmoving. His wrists were bound in front of him, his face smudged with dirt, but he was alive. Mojo whined and pressed his nose against the boy's cheek before licking his face.

Liam stirred, letting out a weak, disoriented moan.

Brooklyn fell to her knees beside him, gathering him in her arms and pressing her forehead against his as sobs wracked her body.

"Oh, Liam," she whispered, holding him tightly. "We found you. We found you."

Ethan crouched beside them, his hand on her back, sensitive to the trembles wracking her frame. Relief crashed over him in waves, but he didn't let his guard down. Not yet.

Ethan tapped his earbud. "We got him," he said, his voice rough with emotion.

"Thank Christ," Rusty commented.

Cooper added, “I second that.”

Brooklyn pulled back slightly, brushing Liam’s hair from his face. “You’re safe now, baby,” she whispered. “You’re safe.”

CHAPTER 22

Brooklyn struggled to keep her eyes open as she watched Jackson and Liam play a video game. They were sprawled on the hospital bed, trash-talking each other with the kind of playful banter only the male of the species could manage. The sound of their laughter was the best thing she had heard in days, a balm to soothe the exhaustion pressing heavily on her.

She stood from the chair, rolling her stiff shoulders. "I'm going in search of some coffee. Can I get you guys anything?"

"No thanks," Liam called out, grunting as he twisted the controller in his hands. Resilience. Kids were the best at bouncing back. Her brother looked exhausted but happy. He met her gaze and mouthed thank you yet again. He'd been thanking her since he landed and arrived at the hospital.

She smiled in response before stepping into the hallway. Her limbs were leaden. She didn't need coffee; she needed sleep. She pulled her phone from her pocket and sent a text to her brother. She was going to go home and crawl in bed. It had been a long week and she'd been running on adrenaline for the vast majority of it.

Taking the elevator to the ground floor, Brooklyn headed out of the hospital. She was standing on the curb before she realized that she didn't have her car. She'd arrived at the hospital in the ambulance with Liam. "Shit." She could call Ethan. She knew he'd come get her, but she really wasn't ready to see him at the moment.

She owed him an explanation for not confronting him about their first night together.

If this were a romance novel, she'd call the heroine who did this 'too stupid to live,' but being on this side of it, she realized it was all well and good to say everything could be solved with a conversation, but the reality was different. In real life, that conversation would have been so excruciatingly humiliating for her, considering she still felt like a moron for not knowing her ex had been cheating on her.

Nope, she wasn't ready to eat humble pie just yet. She was going to need a hell of a lot of sleep and possibly a few drinks before she was willing to go down that road.

She pulled up one of the ride-share apps on her phone when she heard a voice calling her name. Looking up, she smiled. Leilani was walking toward her. "I'm so glad I ran into you," she said giving Brooklyn a hug. "Keoni made me promise to check on Liam. He's still stuck at home, and he can be quite demanding."

Brooklyn nodded. "Teenage boys are no joke. Liam's doing fine though, thanks for asking. He's upstairs playing video games with his father."

Leilani chuckled. "Why am I not surprised? Where are you headed?"

"Going home," Brooklyn said. "I could use a shower and some serious sleep."

"I bet you could. What a horrible experience for you. Do you want a lift?"

"Are you sure?" Brooklyn responded. "I wouldn't want you to go out of your way." She really didn't want to inconvenience Leilani, but a ride home would be magical.

"It's not a problem. It's the least I can do." Leilani linked her arm through Brooklyn's and the two women walked through the parking lot to Leilani's Mercedes convertible. "Hop in."

"Thank you so much for this." The cushy leather seats seemed to hug her body, and

she hoped she wouldn't fall asleep on the drive home. Good thing the roof was down. They pulled out of the parking lot and headed toward home.

"Did they ever find out who was behind the kidnapping?" Leilani asked as she made a right turn.

Brooklyn shook her head. It was the one black cloud lingering over all this. "No. Still no idea who was behind it."

"My money is on Hiroshi Yamamoto, Ren's grandfather. He is definitely up to something. I keep seeing him holding secret meetings at the club. As soon as he walks in, they close the blinds, and the men he's meeting with... look shady. Hard as nails."

Brooklyn tried not to let the anxiety build in her chest. Liam was fine. They were keeping an eye on him at the hospital. There were copies of the thumb drive around even if they were still encrypted. The danger must be passed. The thumb drive. She'd gone with Liam in the ambulance and hadn't thought any more about it. She didn't bother to reach for it, she knew it was still in her pocket. Shit.

"Maybe, but I think the police cleared him." Was Nova wrong about him? Her stomach gave a lurch.

"I think they should look again," Leilani said. "I'm sure they'll find something if they look harder."

Brooklyn glanced at Leilani. Her face was a mask of neutrality, and her eyes were hidden by large black sunglasses. But her tone made a shiver go up Brooklyn's spine.

"Well, I will tell them to look again when I see them."

“And to think all of this over a USB drive.” Leilani shook her head.

Brooklyn’s head jerked back in confusion. Had she and Ethan mentioned the thumb drive when they spoke with Leilani? Had they even known about it then? She was so tired and frazzled she couldn’t remember. Maybe Liam mentioned it to the boys. That made more sense. She was being silly. This was Leilani. They’d hung out at soccer games together, discussed what it was like to be the aunt to the boys but have a mother-like role. She really was losing it. The sooner she got home, the better.

They got on the highway and drove in silence for a few minutes. When Leilani blew by their exit, Brooklyn’s unease returned with a vengeance.

“Hey, you missed the exit.” Brooklyn had her cell phone on her lap. How could she pick it up and call for help without the other woman noticing?

Leilani turned to Brooklyn. “Do the police have the thumb drive?”

Brooklyn tried not to panic. This was beyond her only being tired. This was something altogether different. “Um...I think so?” She didn’t want to admit to having it. This whole conversation was making her extremely uneasy.

“That’s unfortunate,” Leilani clucked.

“What? Why?” Brooklyn was openly staring now.

“Because I know you’re lying.” Leilani’s face went hard. “And I hate being lied to.” She quickly snatched Brooklyn’s cell phone. Brooklyn watched her last lifeline as Leilani tossed it out as she sped down the freeway.

Now what the hell was she supposed to do?

CHAPTER 23

“Hey buddy, how are you feeling?” Ethan asked as he entered the room with Mojo at his heels.

Liam grinned. “Ethan! Mojo!”

The dog went to the edge of the bed and licked the boy’s hand.

“I’m Jackson,” Liam’s father said as he got off the bed. “And I owe you a huge thanks. Both of you.” He nodded toward Mojo.

“I’m just glad it all worked out okay. Liam is an impressive kid. Super smart. His science fair project was amazing.”

“Thanks,” Liam said and then picked up his controller again. “What do you say? One more game, Dad?”

Jackson groaned. “One more, and then you need to rest, and so do I.” Jackson picked up the controller and sat back down on the bed next to his son.

Ethan gave Liam a once-over. The kid looked good if a bit tired. He would have a rough road ahead though. Something like this was bound to cause nightmares. It would take Liam a while to process everything. Ethan just hoped Jackson would get the kid the help he needed, but with Brooklyn as his aunt, Ethan was pretty sure Liam would be just fine. “I have a quick question, Liam, if you don’t mind.”

The boy glanced at his father. “Um...sure.”

Ethan put his hands in his pockets wanting to show the boy he was relaxed and it wasn't a big deal. “So why did you get into the SUV at school? Did you think you knew the driver?”

Liam shrugged. “I thought it was Ren. I got a text that I thought was from him. He asked if I could bring him some stuff from his locker to the gate. I got the stuff and put it in my backpack. Then when I got to the SUV, I thought he was inside, so I got in to give him his stuff. It wasn't until we were moving that I realized Ren wasn't in the truck.”

Liam looked down at his hands. “I guess that was pretty dumb wasn't it?”

“No,” Ethan said. “Not at all. You expected it to be one of your friends. You had no way of knowing it wasn't.” Ethan paused and then asked. “But what made you think the text was from Ren if it wasn't from his usual phone number?”

“The way it was signed. Ren always signs everything with a capital RN.”

Jackson shot a look at Ethan and Ethan got the message. His opportunity to grill the man's son was over. “Thanks for telling me. One last question, where's your aunt?”

Jackson tilted his controller and cursed. “She sent me a text about a half hour ago that she was going home to get some sleep.”

“Huh,” was all Ethan said but his gut clenched. He'd just come from Brooklyn's place and he was pretty sure she hadn't been home. Maybe they'd crossed paths. He blew out a breath. “Well, I'm glad you're doing well Liam. How about when you're up to it, you come by the ranch and see Mojo put through his paces?”

Liam stopped playing and grinned. "It's a deal."

"You hang in there," Ethan said and offered his hand to Jackson.

The two men shook hands. "I really do owe you," Jackson said with a glance at his son.

"No worries. We'll talk soon about coming to the ranch." With that, he gestured to Mojo, who had been waiting patiently at his feet, and the two walked out of the room.

A nurse in the hallway frowned at Mojo and was about to say something when Cooper and Nova strode up, Nova's badge out on her belt. "The dogs are with me," she growled.

The nurse shot her a look but said nothing as she went back down the hallway.

"How's Liam?" Coop asked.

"Doing well. He'll have to get over the mental stress but he's a strong kid, I think he'll be okay."

"I'll say," Nova agreed. "Not too many kids would have been able to escape and run through the rainforest like that. Impressive." She frowned as her phone went off. Glancing at the screen, she swore. "Is Brooklyn in there?"

"No, why?"

"I need to get the thumb drive from her. The IT guys managed to crack the encryption software but there was some kind of self-destruct sequence, so we couldn't see anything that was on it. They said that the original on the USB drive will not have the same safeguard. If we get that then we can see what the hell is on that drive."

Ethan's stomach dropped. "Brooklyn still has the drive?"

"Yeah, in all the confusion no one got it from her." Nova frowned. "What's wrong?"

Ethan held up a hand as he called Brooklyn, but the call went straight to voicemail. He immediately called the comms center and put it on speaker.

Bellamy picked up. "Yo, brother. What's up?"

"I'm with Cooper and Nova. I need you to check the cameras at Brooklyn's place. Is she at home?"

"Sure." The sound of typing came down the line. "Nah man, she's not there. She hasn't been there since you guys left last night."

"Shit." Ethan ran a hand through his hair as Mojo whined at his feet as if sensing his sudden stress.

"What's going on?" Bellamy asked.

"Brooklyn still has the drive and she's missing." Ethan's chest hurt. Nothing could happen to Brooklyn. He just couldn't take it. She had to be safe.

"We don't know that she's missing," Nova said. "Just that she's not at the hospital and not at home. Maybe she went to get some groceries or something."

Ethan shook his head. "She sent a text to her brother Jackson saying she was going home to go to bed because she was exhausted. Also, her car is back at her place. She would've needed to call someone or take a ride-share home."

"Bellamy, track her phone. It's cloned to mine. The guys should have access." Ethan

couldn't believe this was happening.

"Shit," Bellamy said.

"What?" Ethan's heart was slamming against his ribcage.

"It's dead."

"Like the battery died?" Nova asked.

"Maybe, but the last known triangulation off the cell towers put her on the A Mamalahoa Highway when it disappeared.

Ethan met Cooper's gaze. That wasn't a good sign and they both knew it.

"Bellamy, can you get into the hospital's video surveillance system? Maybe we can see who she left with," Cooper suggested.

"I'll see what I can do. Call you back."

Ethan leaned against the wall and tried to slow his racing thoughts. Panicking would not help. Brooklyn was in trouble. He needed to find her ASAP. Her phone dying while she was on the highway could mean many things, but his money was on someone throwing the phone out the window. Brooklyn was out there in trouble and all on her own. He needed to find her and fast.

CHAPTER 24

The words sent Brooklyn's heart rate soaring causing a deafening roar in her ears.

"I...what are you talking about?" Brooklyn demanded. She looked about frantically, but they were speeding along on the freeway, and there was no escape.

"Do you really think I don't have contacts in the police? I would know if they had the drive. You still have it and I want it back."

"You! You are behind all this? You are Yakuza?"

Leilani let out a bark of laughter as she nonchalantly pulled a gun from her designer handbag. "Don't be so shocked. Just because I'm a woman doesn't mean I can't run a business, and that's really all it is; a business."

"But...Keoni and Rick..." Brooklyn's voice faded out. How could this be happening?

"Keoni is my brother Haruto's child. Haruto thought he could take over when our father died. I decided I wanted to be in control. I took Keoni to keep my brother in line. If Haruto acts against me, I will kill Keoni."

Horror washed over Brooklyn. This woman had to be out of her mind. Brooklyn looked around her as they exited the highway. She wasn't sure where they were, but everything around her was industrial.

Dammit, she should have been paying better attention. Shit . As the car rolled toward

the end of the ramp, Brooklyn braced herself. When Leilani stopped, she was going to bolt from the car.

The car slowed and approached the stop sign. Three. Two. One.

“Don’t even think about it,” Leilani said as she pointed the gun at Brooklyn. “I will shoot you.”

Breathing became impossible as Brooklyn’s lungs froze. Leilani would kill her. She knew it as sure as she knew she was in serious trouble. What the hell was she going to do?

The car picked up speed and Leilani placed the gun in her lap. Brooklyn glanced at it. Could she get to it faster than this crazy woman could? Could she knock it onto the floor and escape before Leilani found it again?

As they drove along an access road Brooklyn’s gaze darted around, frantically trying to find something that would help her. An old billboard on the side of the road drew her attention. It was old, and the picture was ripped, but the word Taekwondo was visible.

Calm settled over her like a blanket. She wasn’t helpless. She had the skills she needed. All she needed now was the opportunity to use them. After a few deep breaths, Brooklyn started taking note of her environment. Along with grease and exhaust, she caught a whiff of sea air even as she first caught sight of the docks. At least that could mean there were people around. And cameras. Dockyards always had cameras. Surely someone would be looking for her by now.

Her stomach rolled as Brooklyn suddenly realized that no one would be looking for her. Not for quite a while. She said she was going home to sleep. It would be tonight before her brother bothered to reach out to her... if he reached out at all. He’d want to

let her sleep so he might not call until tomorrow.

She was off this weekend so no one from work would come looking. Ethan. He might track her down, but then again maybe not. There was no one she knew for sure would sound an alarm about her being missing.

That wasn't strictly true. Ethan would raise the alarm but who knew if it would be in time.

Leilani made a turn into a boatyard. She steered toward one of the docks and parked just outside the open door of a warehouse. "Don't even think about trying to escape," she said as she casually removed her seat belt. "I won't hesitate to shoot."

It sounded like she meant business, but Brooklyn couldn't lose hope. There were people around. Brooklyn glanced around to confirm they weren't alone. There was a forklift driver on the next dock over and two men walking at the other end of the pier. Maybe she could yell and attract attention.

She drew in a deep breath when her door was wrenched open and she was unceremoniously pulled out of the car and into the warehouse. The men holding her were the two who had tried to grab Liam. She fought, but one of them slugged her in the jaw, and her head snapped back. They continued to drag her until they were back among the pallets.

"This is far enough," Leilani said as they stopped and held her next to a bunch of boxes wrapped in cellophane.

"Now," she said to the guy that Brooklyn had hit in the throat, "get me the drive." He turned to Brooklyn and his sneer sent a chill up her spine.

CHAPTER 25

Ethan tried to calm his spinning mind. “Do you have any ideas about who could be behind this whole thing, Nova? Any at all?”

Nova shook her head. “We’ve still got nothing.”

Ethan’s expression darkened. “Could we have missed something on Yamamoto?”

Nova exhaled sharply. “Possible, but unlikely.”

“If it’s not Yamamoto, then who else could it be?” Ethan demanded.

“Is there any lead you didn’t follow?” Nova asked. “Anything no matter how small.”

Ethan thought back. “We never connected with Liam’s friend Ren. He’s the only one we didn’t talk to. He’s been out sick. He’s also the one who supposedly lured Liam to the SUV via text.”

“Let’s talk to him then. What’s his last name? Do you have a number for him?”

Ethan swung around and went back into Liam’s room. “Hey, Liam?”

“Dude, I thought you left.”

Ethan tried to maintain a calm exterior. “Can you do me a favor and reach out to your friend, Ren? I need to talk to him for a second. We never got to talk to him, and I

want to make sure we tied up all the loose ends.”

Jackson’s eyes narrowed, but Ethan gave him a tiny head shake.

“Sure.” Liam turned to his father. “Can I borrow your phone?”

Jackson handed him the phone and Liam initiated a video call. “Hey, Ren.”

“Liam! Are you okay? I heard you were kidnapped!”

“Yeah,” Liam said a little uncertainly, “um...I’m good. Someone here wants to talk to you, okay?”

“Sure.”

Liam handed the phone over to Ethan, who tilted it so he could see Ren. The boy didn’t look so hot which was confirmed by a loud wracking cough. “Hi, Ren, I’m Ethan, a friend of Brooklyn and Liam’s. I just wanted to ask you a few questions about last week. Is that okay? Are you up for it? I know you’ve been out of school for the last week.”

Nova pulled out her phone and began recording the call.

"Yeah, Nakoa mentioned you." Ren’s voice was raspy. "I caught walking pneumonia—or at least that’s what my grandfather called it. I don’t know why it’s called ‘walking.’ I didn’t get to walk anywhere all week."

Ethan forced a chuckle. "Well, I’m glad you’re feeling better. Do you mind if I ask a couple of questions? Did anything unusual happen last week.”

"Sure. I was talking with Nakoa. He said you were asking if anything weird happened

this past week. I spent most of it home so there's not much to tell. Other than the text. I swear I didn't send it. Liam told me he thought it was me who asked him to come to the SUV but it wasn't. I swear." Ren's words were punctuated by another hacking cough.

"I believe you, Ren." And he did. This kid wasn't lying. "Did you notice anything out of the ordinary? Anything at all?" Ethan tried not to sound hopeful, but they were out of leads and Brooklyn was in trouble.

"I...uh...well I don't want to get anyone in trouble, but I saw Keoni stick something in Liam's backpack and then hide the backpack under the coats when we were at the café. He looked kind of scared when he was doing it too. It was weird, because, like, why didn't Keoni just hand the thing to Liam if he wanted Liam to have it? Nakoa and I wouldn't care. And why did he look scared? But then I remembered that his aunt showed up to pick him up that day. Normally it's his uncle. Keoni says his Uncle Rick is a lawyer, but I don't think he works much because sometimes he comes to the café and hangs out while we play. Anyway, his Aunt Leilani picked him up that day. He told me that she scares him. She scares me, too."

"Me three," Liam chimed in. "I know Keoni doesn't like her. He says she's mean."

Could she be behind this? "Leilani is mean and scary?"

"Yes. Even his Uncle Rick thinks so. Keoni says she bullies him all the time."

"It's true. He told me that too," Liam added.

Ethan wasn't sure what to make of it but at least it was a lead. "Thanks for telling me, Ren. Nothing else stands out to you?"

"Nope."

“Okay. Here’s Liam.” Liam took the phone, and the two boys started discussing video games. Ethan nodded toward the door and Nova and Cooper followed him out. He turned to Nova. “What do you think?”

“It’s a lead. It would explain how Liam ended up with the USB. He said he just found it in his bag and thought Brooklyn had put it in there for him as a surprise but—’

“Brooklyn hadn’t seen it before,” Ethan interjected. “She mentioned that when she picked it up off the science fair project.”

Nova made a call. “What’s this Leilani’s last name?” she asked after opening a line with someone in her office.

“Kobayashi,” Ethan supplied.

Nova relayed the info to the person on the line and then went back to waiting. She cocked her head. “There’s been a rumor that a shot caller for the Yakuza lived in Hawai’i, but no one had any clue who it was. Whoever it is has been playing it close to the vest for years, but a suburban housewife? That’s a hell of a cover.”

“Makes a certain sense though,” Cooper added. “She would have all kinds of time to do what she wanted, and no one would look twice at her.”

Nova was about to say something, but she pulled the phone back in place. “Tell him to call me ASAP.” Then she hung up. “Someone at the office says the name Kobayashi rings a bell and they’re going to start digging.”

Ethan’s cell rang and he answered the video call. Bellamy and Rusty’s faces appeared on screen. “I sent you a clip of the video. It shows Brooklyn walking across the parking lot with some woman.”

Ethan quickly checked the clip. “Leilani,” he confirmed. “Fuck. Find her.”

“We thought you’d say; that so we already tracked her. She’s driving a Merc, so we called Mercedes and reported it stolen. They tracked it for us.” She’s at a warehouse in Waikoloa.

Nova frowned. “They won’t do that without someone from law enforcement on hand.”

Cooper gave a small shrug. “I might’ve used your badge number and said Nova was a family name. The guy felt bad for me.”

Nova was pissed. Ethan could see it in her face but he didn’t have time for that shit now. “Send me a pin and then meet me there.”

He ended the call and took off down the hallway, mojo at his heels. Hang in there, baby, I’m coming.

CHAPTER 26

Brooklyn struggled against the men restraining her as one of them reached into her pocket. She twisted violently, aiming a sharp kick at his knee, but he shifted just in time, dodging her strike. In retaliation, he backhanded her across the face, sending an explosion of white-hot pain through her skull. Stars burst in her vision, and she bit back a cry.

“You really shouldn’t make this so hard on yourself,” Leilani said coolly as a young Asian man approached with a laptop. Her voice was calm and detached, as if she were discussing the weather. “Seriously, you’re wasting your time. Die with dignity.”

Brooklyn spat blood onto the floor, her breath ragged. “No way in hell am I going to make this easier on you.”

Leilani shrugged, unfazed. “Suit yourself.”

The man yanked the small car-shaped USB from Brooklyn’s pocket and handed it to Leilani. She turned away, setting the laptop on a nearby wooden pallet. The glow of the screen cast eerie shadows across the dimly lit warehouse.

Panic clawed through Brooklyn’s chest, but she forced herself to think. She needed to buy time. Get Leilani talking. Gone was the friendly, smiling neighbor she once knew. In her place stood a ruthless businesswoman, calculating and unyielding.

And what did all-powerful businesspeople have in common? Ego.

Brooklyn latched onto the only weapon she had—Leilani’s pride. “What’s on the drive?” She forced curiosity into her tone. “What is so damn important? And how did you let your own nephew get his hands on it? Seems like someone fell down on the job there.”

Leilani’s fingers stilled on the keyboard and her gaze flicked toward Brooklyn, irritation flashing across her face. The emotion was subtle, but Brooklyn caught it.

“My husband,” Leilani muttered, exhaling sharply. “He caused this entire mess.”

Brooklyn schooled her face into a neutral expression. This was what she needed—an opening. She was giving Leilani a chance to brag, to paint herself as the brilliant mind who had everything under control. Businesspeople loved to talk about themselves.

“What did he do?” Brooklyn pressed, pleased that her voice remained steady despite the rapid thudding of her heart.

“He left our nephew alone in the house without locking up the thumb drive. That stupid fucking car USB. What kind of grown man uses something like that?” Leilani said, her tone edged with irritation. “I should have realized sooner that Keoni was up to something, but Rikishi is supposed to monitor him.” Her lips curled in distaste. “I did ask Keoni about it, but he denied any knowledge.” She almost smiled. “I must admit, Keoni is far more resourceful than I gave him credit for. Rarely do I underestimate someone but I believed him when he said he didn’t take it. Rikishi, on the other hand, never fails to disappoint. I assumed he had lost it somewhere. But no, my nephew was the problem. I won’t underestimate him again.”

She turned back to the laptop, fingers clicking rapidly across the keys.

Brooklyn’s mind raced. She needed to keep Leilani talking. She needed to stall.

“What is so important on the drive that you needed to kidnap a child?” she asked again, injecting casual interest into her tone. “What does it matter if I know? You’re going to kill me anyway. Humor me—what did Keoni find?”

Leilani sighed as if indulging a petulant child. “He downloaded a list of original files detailing our holdings in certain countries.”

Brooklyn’s stomach churned. “Front companies,” she murmured.

Leilani inclined her head. “Yes. They make business operations easier, and if that list were to fall into the wrong hands... well, let’s just say it would not be good for business.”

Brooklyn’s mind reeled, but before she could formulate another question, Leilani’s eyes sharpened as the screen flickered. The verification was complete.

Leilani’s lips curled into a satisfied smirk. “Looks like it’s all here.” She snapped the laptop shut and turned to the two men holding Brooklyn. “Take her out to the ocean. Make sure her body disappears.”

Brooklyn knew this was coming the minute Leilani pulled a gun on her. But the knowledge didn’t stop the icy terror flooding her veins. The men tightened their grip on her arms, dragging her toward the exit. The humid night air hit her like a sauna as they stepped outside, the sound of crashing waves in the distance.

She thrashed violently, her breath coming in panicked gasps. This couldn’t be how it ended.

“Move,” one of the men growled, yanking her forward.

Brooklyn’s mind raced. She needed a way out. Now.

CHAPTER 27

Ethan's truck rolled to a stop just outside the dock and left the vehicle idling as he scanned the darkened area ahead. The salty tang of the ocean filled the air, thick and humid. The distant crash of waves was a steady reminder of the water's deadly pull. The orangish glow of overhead lights cast long, jagged shadows across the warehouse and the dock, stretching toward a sleek black car parked near the entrance.

Ethan's grip tightened on the wheel. They had her. They had Brooklyn.

Cooper leaned forward from the passenger seat, his gaze locked onto the vehicle. "That's Leilani's car. She's here."

Nova, sitting in the backseat, exhaled sharply. "Then Brooklyn is too."

A muscle in Ethan's jaw ticked. "We move now. Cooper, you and Nova take the left side of the dock. I'll go down the far end." He turned to Mojo, the dog already alert beside him, ears pricked forward. "Stay close, buddy."

Cooper nodded. "We'll cover you."

They moved in sync; each step deliberate and silent. Ethan's boots barely made a sound as he slipped through the shadows, his breath slow and steady like it was on every mission, despite the adrenaline roaring through his veins. The dock stretched out before him. The scent of gasoline and saltwater mingled in the air, thick and heavy. The faint hum of a boat engine idling nearby spiked his sense of urgency.

Then he heard it.

A scream. High, desperate.

Brooklyn.

No time to lose, Ethan broke into a sprint, Mojo kept pace beside him, his low growl barely audible over the rush of blood pounding in Ethan's ears. The scene ahead came into focus in an instant—two men, thick with muscle, dragging Brooklyn toward the edge of the dock where a boat waited, its motor rumbling, ready to disappear into the dark abyss of the ocean.

She was fighting wildly. Her body twisted and kicked; her screams cut through the night like a blade. One of the men tried to pin her arms, but she jerked her elbow up, catching him beneath the chin. The other wrenched her back, and she gasped, the sound laced with fury and fear.

Ethan raised his gun. "Let her go!"

The men snapped their heads toward him. Brooklyn took advantage of the distraction, twisting violently and breaking one arm free. Without hesitation, she drove her elbow into the throat of the man closest to her. He choked, stumbling back, his hands flying to his neck. Mojo launched his body toward the man and wrapped his sharp teeth around the man's forearm. He shrieked in pain.

"Mojo, release!" Ethan shouted. As soon as the dog let the guy go and backed away, Ethan took the shot.

The man crumpled instantly, his body hitting the dock with a dull thud. Brooklyn staggered and crashed to the dock as the second man reached for her again. Before Ethan could fire, Mojo lunged forward, his powerful body airborne as he slammed

into the man's chest. They tumbled to the ground, the man's startled yell cut off as the dog's snarling teeth snapped inches from his throat.

Ethan closed the distance, gun still trained on the attacker. "Don't move."

The man's wild eyes darted between Ethan and the dog pinning him down. His breath came in ragged bursts, his hands trembling in the air. Brooklyn scrambled away, her chest heaving, eyes wide with shock and relief.

Cooper appeared from the side, gun raised, his gaze sweeping the dock. "You good?"

"Yeah." Ethan didn't lower his weapon. "Where's Leilani?"

Nova came through the warehouse entrance, pushing Leilani, whose wrists were cuffed behind her back. The place was swarmed with cops who'd rushed in as backup.

Ethan's gut unknotted at the sight of the woman in cuffs.

But then Brooklyn was in his arms.

She threw herself against him, clutching the front of his vest, her entire body trembling. Ethan wrapped his arms around her, holding her close, grounding her. Her breath hitched against his chest, her fingers digging into his back as if afraid to let go.

"You're safe," he murmured against her hair. "I've got you."

She nodded against him, but when she pulled back, her eyes were shining with unshed tears. "I thought—" Her voice broke, and she swallowed hard, shaking her head. "I thought that was it."

Ethan cupped her face gently, his thumbs brushing over her cheekbones. "I would never let that happen."

She let out a shaky breath, nodding. "I know."

The tension in his chest eased. "Nova has Leilani. This is all over."

Brooklyn just nodded as she held on to Ethan as if her life depended on it, for which he was eternally grateful because he was equally sure that his own life depended on her.

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Brooklyn shuffled into the kitchen still wearing boxer shorts and a tank, rubbing sleep from her eyes as she reached for the coffee maker. She hit the button, listening to the familiar gurgle as it came to life. Normally, she got up and had a shower immediately, but after the week she'd had, she thought she deserved a day to sleep in and take it slow. The bruises on her body from yesterday's attack also demanded she not do anything too quickly.

The doorbell rang and she frowned. Her brother had said he and Liam would drop by later. Who could this be? Barefoot, she padded to the door and peeked through the peephole. Ethan stood on the other side, his tall frame relaxed but unreadable. He held a brown paper bag in one hand, his fingers curled around it like whatever was inside mattered.

Brooklyn hesitated for only a second before unlocking the door and pulling it open. Her heart hammered against her rib cage. She owed this man her life and an apology.

"Hey," he said, his voice still sleep-roughened.

"Hey," she echoed, eyeing the bag before stepping aside to let him in.

His presence filled her small kitchen as he set the bag on the breakfast bar. "I figured you might be hungry," he said, nudging it toward her.

Her stomach growled loudly and Ethan grinned. She shrugged. "I guess there's no point in denying it."

"Nope," Ethan agreed letting his glance linger on her chest for maybe a beat too long.

Brooklyn smiled to herself. At least she knew he was still interested. Would he be, though, after what she had to tell him? Her stomach clenched at the thought. Lifting the bag, she peeked inside. "Loco Moco?" she asked, arching a brow.

"Thought you could use some comfort food."

"Great idea." Brooklyn grabbed two plates and portioned out the meal, the scent of gravy and fried eggs making her stomach tighten with hunger. She poured them both coffee and slid a mug across the counter to him before taking a seat on the stool beside him.

When she sat, her tank top rose and Ethan gasped. "What's that?" He pointed to the rosy mark above her buttock.

"Just a birthmark."

"It looks like an island."

Brooklyn glanced at the mark. "Yeah. Like the Big Island. I think that's probably why I ended up here."

Ethan's nostrils flared and he frowned as he wrapped his hands around the warm ceramic without taking a sip. Instead, he watched her, his gaze steady. "We need to talk."

She nodded, but before he could go on, she set down her fork and looked him in the eye. "I owe you an apology."

His brow furrowed. "For what?"

She exhaled slowly. "For being mean to you. And for pushing you away." She took a breath, steadying herself. "That night—the night of your accident—we slept

together." She forced herself to hold his gaze. "You were at my place. You left early in the morning, and I had no idea why. But then you never called. I called you, but you never called back. I thought..." She shook her head. "I thought you ghosted me."

Ethan's expression darkened, his fingers tightening around his mug. "Brooklyn?—"

She cut him off. "I was hurt. My ex had an affair, and I—" She swallowed. "I assumed the worst. I didn't trust my own judgment when it came to men anymore, and you... Your behavior seemed to indicate that I'd made the same mistake again. Instead of confronting you, I just shut you out. I'm sorry."

Ethan stared at her. He set his coffee down, his jaw tightening. "I don't remember much about that night," he admitted, his voice rough. "Mostly just flashes of scents and color and sounds, like laughter. But I can't remember... But that birthmark..."

Brooklyn's stomach twisted, but before she could say anything, he leaned in slightly, inhaling.

"You smell like vanilla," he murmured.

She blinked, caught off guard. "What?"

"The woman in my dreams...you, I guess." His voice dropped lower. "She smelled like citrus and summer rain."

Brooklyn let out a soft laugh. "I ran out of my usual body lotion."

Something shifted in his expression. He reached for her, his hand sliding to the back of her neck as he pulled her forward. His lips met hers, warm and certain, a kiss that stole her breath. She'd hoped he might feel the same way about her as she felt about him, but she didn't know for sure. All she knew was she was falling in love with Ethan Foster and doing her best to stop the tumble.

He pulled back just enough to whisper against her lips, "I don't remember that evening, but I do remember you. You're the woman in my dreams. I am so fucking glad you're real. I feel like I've been searching for you forever."

Then he kissed her again, and this time, Brooklyn let herself fall.

Six weeks later

"That was a beautiful wedding," Nova commented, then sipped her champagne.

"Yes, it was," Sienna agreed. "Cliffside at sunset is damn hard to beat." She glanced at Nova, a knowing glint in her eyes. "Is that the type of wedding you and Cooper are going for?"

Nova laughed. "I have no idea what kind of wedding we're going to have. Neither one of us can seem to make a decision on it."

"Elope," Rusty suggested, lifting his beer to his lips. "Then throw a big party afterward."

Bellamy and Octavia swayed together on the makeshift dance floor, wrapped up in each other while the rest of the guests twirled and laughed around them. The golden glow from overhead string lights made everything feel warm, intimate, and perfect.

Sienna smiled. "It's nice to see them so happy—especially Octavia."

"They'd better live it up now," Cooper said, smirking. "Because once that baby comes, there'll be no sleep and no private life."

Nova snorted. "Like you would know."

Cooper shrugged but didn't argue.

“How’s the apartment hunt going?” Brooklyn asked, shifting the conversation.

Rusty and Sienna exchanged a glance before sighing in unison.

Ethan chuckled. “That bad, huh?”

“It’s hard to find a decent place with a good-sized backyard for Soda,” Rusty admitted, finishing off his beer. He turned to Brooklyn. “Anything available in your neighborhood?”

“Not that I know of, but I can ask around.”

Under the table, Ethan squeezed Brooklyn’s hand, his thumb brushing over her skin. He had never felt luckier than he did at this moment. He had the woman he loved beside him, his best friends around him, and a life that finally felt right. It didn’t get better than this.

“What about you, Ethan?” Sienna asked. “Are you going to find a new place so Mojo has space to run around?”

Ethan smiled, turning his gaze to Brooklyn. “Funnily enough, I did find a place. Turns out it’s already inhabited, but the owner is kind of cute and she loves dogs, so I think it’s going to work.”

Nova gasped. “You two are moving in together? That’s awesome! Right on, Brooklyn.” Then she narrowed her eyes playfully. “Just make sure he clears out when we have girls’ night.”

Brooklyn nodded. “No question.”

Girls’ night had become a tradition, with Brooklyn hosting it more often than not. Ethan still didn’t know how she had so seamlessly become part of his life, fitting into

every corner like she had always been meant to be there. It was effortless.

His fingers curled around the small velvet box in his pocket, feeling the weight of the moment. Not tonight. But soon. He would ask her, and he already knew her answer. She had to say yes—because there was no way he was ever going to live his life without her.

He leaned forward and kissed her.

Brooklyn pulled back slightly, her eyes searching his. “What was that for?”

“Just ’cause.” He stood, tugging her hand. “Come on, let’s dance.”

She smiled, rising to her feet, and he slid an arm around her waist, pulling her close. As they moved onto the dance floor, the warmth of her against him, the steady rhythm of her heartbeat, Ethan knew—deep in his bones—that this was exactly where they were meant to be.