

Prologue

Three Months Later...

Luca

I walk down the dark alleyway in the armpit of lower Manhattan, my hooded head dipped low to hide the deep gashes around my left eye and the purplish-blue bruises littering my jaw. My hands are stuck deep into the pockets of my jeans to hide the bandages covering my bloody knuckles. I look up for a split second at the end of the narrow pathway to squint at the street sign hanging above. The place I'm headed should be ahead on the right. Half a block up, I stop in front of a dented, black metal door. I pull the handle and it creaks open. The place is small and dingy. Cigarette smoke fills my lungs, but I fight the urge to cough.

Never show any hint of weakness.

It's how I made it to the top ranks of the MMA. Until my titles were stripped away and my career went to complete shit, that is. I clench my fists and take another deep breath.

Nobody looks up when I enter the bar. Groups of men are huddled together at small tables, tossing back shots. I don't stop to exchange greetings with anyone, and I don't make eye contact. I just keep walking toward the back room, toward my destination, not giving anyone a chance to recognize me.

It's been a long time...fucking long enough, as far as Matteo Fabrizzi is concerned.

I push open the door to find my father's second-in-command waiting for me at a table for two. The only table.

How quaint.

I unzip my black jacket and sink into a chair across from him. My eyes are glued to his small beady ones, but he doesn't flinch. He never does. He is always good under pressure. It's one of the reasons why Dad picked him.

There's another reason, too, which is why I'm sitting across from him in this shithole bar. He didn't tell me as much when he called, but I know what's coming.

I've always known. I've just chosen to ignore it. But tonight, I'm ready to listen.

Ready to act. Ready to take back what's rightfully mine.

"It's over, Luca."

I smirk. "It sure as fuck is. You should have seen the other guy."

"You've been fucking around with these half-assed, back alley fights for long enough. It's time for you to get your shit together and take your place in this family. We need you. How many years do you have left?" Matteo leans closer. "Your lack of involvement makes the family look weak. It makes us vulnerable. Your dad worked his fucking ass off to make this organization as strong as possible. And now..."

The rest of Matteo's bullshit 'rally the team' speech is lost on me.

Your dad.

Your dad is dead.

Your dad was killed.

Killed three months ago by the one person who destroyed my life...who took everything from me.

I was in long before I even set foot into this hellhole.

I hold up a hand and stop Matteo mid-plea. "Enough. You want me? You've got me."

Chapter One

Nico

"He's coming. He's coming!"

"Be prepared. Be ready. Be careful.

"You have a lot of responsibilities, Nico."

Bits of conversations ricochet off the walls of my mind, eating away at my confidence to uncover an all-consuming fear that lurks inside me like a predator ready to strike.

Because he's out there. I know it, Dad knows it, the guys know it.

And most of all...he knows it.

Fear makes you weak.

Weakness gets you killed.

I slide out of the passenger seat of my Audi R8, my feet landing on the concrete of my driveway. I slam the door shut and walk the few feet to the front door. Shaye is waiting for me on the other side, hopefully wearing nothing but the apron she uses when she cooks dinner. My stomach growls, but I'm not hungry. Not for food, anyway.

I slide my key into the lock and grasp the brass door knob, ready to turn, ready to put this day behind me. Each day is just like the last...work, work, work, wonder...work some more...wonder some more. It's the wondering part that has my brain twisted. I never wonder. I always know.

But this time, I'm a sitting duck, waiting for the hunter.

I don't fucking like it one bit, and the loss of control is crippling. And I don't know how much longer I can bury this shit and hang on to my last shred of sanity. Sometimes I think these mind fucks are worse than someone putting a bullet in my brain.

I push open the door, but the house is dark. Even the kitchen. One light is on. Upstairs, in my bedroom. Maybe she decided to just order pizza. Later. Much later by the time I'm finished with her. Works for me. The sooner I can get Shaye naked, the sooner I can dive inside of her and escape all of this other bullshit. Then, it'll just be us.

The way I wanted it to be.

The way I know it never can be.

I toss my keys into a bowl on the hall table, nearly missing it because I can't really see it. I kick off my shoes and take the stairs two at a time. Seconds pass, and I'm no closer to the top. The staircase looms above me. The faster I jog upward, the faster the steps seem to regenerate.

What the fuck is happening?

I place my hand on the railing, but I don't feel the smooth wood grain along my palm. Instead, it's submerged into a sticky, gel-like-liquid...like quicksand. I yank and pull, but it's useless. My hand is stuck.

I use my other hand as leverage and slap it against the wall. But it slices through the sheet rock, which morphs into the same type of gummy substance. I blink hard at the stairs that seem to lead into the heavens, stairs I can't even climb because I'm literally stuck to the wall now. My heart thumps against my ribcage, blood rushing between my ears.

I can't move. But maybe I can scream. If Shaye is upstairs, she'll hear me and we'll figure this out together. "Shaye!" My mind hears the scream, but my mouth is still closed tight. I try to force my lips apart, but they're also stuck. Just like my body.

"Nico!"

My ears perk up, her voice distracting me from my current situation. She's calling me! She *is* here! I try again. "Shaye!"

Nothing. Nothing but the shrieks that follow my name. And then...

"Help me, Nico!"

A loud crash follows, along with a sinister laugh.

I know that laugh. I've never heard it before, but somehow I know it.

I yank my body left and right, trying to free my hands. Nothing.

"Help! Please!"

Bile rises in my throat. I need to break free. Now. All the preparation, all of the planning...none of it matters. This shit is happening now, and I finally need to reclaim my life. I tug and pull some more as her screams get louder and more desperate. I have to get upstairs now. I can't see through walls, but my gut tells me the only thing that I need to know...Shaye is in danger. And even though I've known what's coming for a long time, I still don't have a solid plan for how I can protect her.

It may be too late...

Fuck, no! Strange sounds emerge from deep within my throat, though my mouth is still stretched into a tight line. I can only hear clanging cymbals and heavy drum beats. Noise. Way too much noise. I won't be able to hear if...

My pulse throbs harder and harder with each passing second until the stairs laid out in front of me morph into a darkened road. There is ice on the ground and silence in the cold, gusty night air. I'm not wearing a coat, I'm in a t-shirt and jeans. But somehow, the frigid temperatures don't phase me one bit. My eyes dart left and right, behind trees, around parked cars. Not a soul appears in front of me, but I'm not alone.

I can feel it. I can feel *him*.

"Nico!"

Shaye's screech pierces the silence again, reminding me of my mission, and I run toward it, my pace quickening, my heart thudding. Seems like I'm running for miles, but the voice grows fainter until I can no longer hear it. Night brightens into day, and hot rays of sunshine stream over the crashing waves on South Beach. Hordes of sunbathers litter the beach, and I race around them, searching, straining to hear her voice, praying I haven't lost her.

But she hasn't made a sound, and I'm not entirely sure how much time has passed.

And I somehow know that it's been a long time since I've heard her voice.

I've traveled so far, although I can't seem to fathom the distance, and she's nowhere to be found.

Am I too late?

I collapse against the tall lifeguard stand, panting. Beads of sweat drip down the sides of my face as I scour the sand, looking for something, any clue that she's still alive, a shred of hope to convince me that I can still save her, that I haven't lost the most important person in my life because of the irrational choices I have made.

Irreversible choices. Damning choices.

My gaze falls down to the white sand and it's speckled with bright red dots. I follow the path of dots until they become larger red splotches. My heart thuds as the stain spreads over the beach, blanketing the earth in a disturbing shade of blood red as far as my eyes can see.

Blood. *Death.*

I fall to the sand, clutching my temples. "Shaye, where are you? Please help me find you. Please come back to me!"

But the words are no longer just in my head. They tumble from my mouth, my voice echoing in the still air. I squeeze my eyes shut and when I crack them open, dark, dank concrete walls close in on me. I creep around a corner, following a trail of large, fluffy marshmallows and somehow I know these 'breadcrumbs' that I'm following are significant, and not just some Willy Wonka type of bullshit that is fucking with my mind. I inch closer to a large doorway, toward the muffled cries that haunt my dreams. A thin stream of red liquid trickles out of the doorway, the marshmallows now floating toward me.

Marshmallows. Shaye loves marshmallows. I need to find Shaye.

I fall to my knees once again, next to Grandpa Vito's motionless body, a devastating image that is forever burned into my memory.

Don't leave, Grandpa. Please. I still have so much more to learn...

You have a lot of responsibilities now, Nico.

My gut clenches, and I'm back on the staircase at my house, my hands finally free of the binding substance. I leap up the rest of the steps toward the landing and tear down the hallway to my bedroom. I slam open the door, out of breath but hopefully not out of time.

"Shaye," I gasp, dragging myself through the empty master suite. "I'm here."

But...*she's* not.

My body rockets to an upright position, sweat drizzling down the front of my heaving chest. My hand instinctively pats the mattress beside me, connecting with the cool, twelve-hundred thread count sheets that I'd bought when Shaye moved back from Miami a few months ago. I'd wanted to make her feel comfortable here in my house, to give her a taste of the luxury I'd worked so hard to attain. There was nothing I wouldn't do for her, nothing I wouldn't give to have her next to me for the rest of our lives.

But months later, I'm still trying to figure out how to give her the life she deserves. I thought I had it all figured out. I thought once I pulled the trigger and blew away Frank Cappodamo, I'd paved the way for our safe future. With one single trigger click I sent his family a message. I sent my own guys a message. Fuck with me or anyone I love, and you will die.

It earned me respect and loyalty, which was great.

It also put a bullseye dead center on my back.

The nightmares started almost immediately after the warehouse massacre, and they've only gotten worse over time. I collapse onto Shaye's pillow and breathe in her flowery scent. She should be here with me, but recently the nightmares have gotten so bad, I've made excuses about work keeping me out late and me not wanting her here by herself in the middle of the night. She's much safer staying at her parents' house, anyway.

The truth is, I can't control these damn dreams. And I hate like hell for her see me in a state of complete fucking weakness. I've tried drinking and drugging myself to sleep, and nothing works. Nothing can bring me peace, not even buried balls deep in Shaye.

I let out a deep sigh and flip onto my back. I know I won't sleep again until I take care of the enemy from beyond the grave.

But this time, it's not the memory of Frank I'm battling.

He's sent in a replacement, a crazier motherfucker than he ever was.

And until I stop Cappodamo's poison from leaking into my life, I'm pretty damn sure I won't have a decent night's sleep again.

Chapter Two

Shaye

I flop down on a bench inside Washington Square Park after class and let out a deep sigh. Radio silence from Nico. Again.

I lean my head back against the hard wood and stare at the blue sky. Rays of light peek through the lush green leaves of the trees, making me squint. The power and strength of the sun is guarded by those leaves and branches. Kind of like this whole thing with Nico, although he's guarding me against something much more harmful than UV rays, I just know it. A shiver runs through me as memories of that fateful night come rushing over me. The hate spewed, the terror, the blood...God, all of the blood.

I know exactly why Nico sent me home last night, why he makes up excuses to get me out of his bed most nights. But I've never let on. I swallow his bullshit stories and smile like it's absolutely fine that he wants me to leave. But it kills me that he can only stand to be around me during daylight hours because the horror of what comes over him when he sleeps is too much for him to bear with an audience laying right next to him.

I rub my temples, and flip open my journal. I start to write, watching the swirls of my words fill up page after page as I tell my notebook all of the things I can't tell the man I love for fear of what he might do, say, or think. Writing has become my sole form of therapy. I can't talk to my parents or Max, and even Sloane, my best friend, can't help me with this.

I've pieced together enough to know that trouble didn't end that night. Nico slayed Cappodamo but that's not the end of the story. Nothing is ever that neat and tidy in the mob. There is more, so much more. Unfortunately, my knowledge is limited to what Nico mumbles in his sleep and what I can glean from heated, closed-door conversations between my dad and Max.

"You might want to give that pen a break. I think you're working it too hard."

I gasp, flinging the pen into the air and twisting in the direction of the intruding voice. "Professor!"

Jason Gary, my Psychology of the Human Mind instructor, grins down at me. That lopsided grin is famous among the female co-eds. It was one of the first things I'd learned when I transferred to NYU this fall. His single dimple, thick, dark hair, and sparkling blue-green eyes have students camping out at Student Services to plead their case for an open spot in any one of his classes.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. I just haven't seen that kind of focus from a student in a while. It's refreshing."

I tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear. "Oh, well, thanks. I guess I just have a lot on my mind these days. Journaling helps me get it out." What I neglect to mention is that whatever ends up on these pages normally scares the shit out of me and makes me sometimes wish I'd taken up a different major.

He points to the bench. "Okay if I sit?"

"Sure." I swallow hard and scoot over a bit to give him more room. And also because I know I'm way too close when the scent of his cologne permeates the air I breathe. I need my own air. My fingertips turn white as they clench the pen, a shiver slithering down my spine. Something about this just feels wrong. Professor Gary sitting next to me with that curious look on his face, all of my conflicted emotions about Nico spilled out onto the page in my lap...everything is way too close for comfort, and I feel very freaking exposed right now.

"You know, journaling is a good way to help you make sense of different feelings and emotions. The exercise of writing can help you figure out the why behind those feelings and process them."

I nod and stare at my notebook. If I make eye contact, what will I see? And do I really want to know? "Yes."

"But sometimes it helps to talk to someone else. You won't always have the answers, and you can write for days, months, and years without coming to any conclusions. A fresh perspective might help you find the answers you're looking for."

My head pops up. "You mean *therapy*? I don't need a therapist!"

He chuckles. "I wasn't implying that you did. I was just saying that an unbiased, uninvolved person can help you work through things better than you doing it on your own."

I manage a weak smile. "That makes sense." Except I could never in a million years share any of this with another living, breathing person. It would be the utter betrayal of so many people. Letting some 'fresh perspective' in on my family's illegal business dealings, talking to a random stranger about my conflicting feelings I have for Nico...if that information got into the wrong hands, I have no idea the extent of the damage it would most certainly do.

"I'm always here to talk if you need to hash anything out."

I have to keep my jaw from dropping because there's not a snowball's chance in hell I'd ever speak a word of this to him. "Thank you very much, Professor. I appreciate it."

"You put a lot of time into your work, Shaye, and you've demonstrated a very keen ability to see into the minds of others. But it's not always easy to turn that introspective lens in on ourselves."

I feel a hot flush creeping up the sides of my face. Is it only because he's complimenting my work? Or is it more about the dreamy smile that makes me want to bite my lower lip?

Or, maybe it's not about the smile after all. Maybe it's because he's so incredibly uncomplicated and transparent. Here is a guy who makes a living out of fleshing out feelings and emotions. Forget the way he looks. He doesn't bottle things up so that the unspoken words become a huge elephant in a room. He's a fan of talking. I'm a fan of talking, too...except, I can't. Not now. And as far as that introspective lens goes, mine is pretty damn fogged up right about now. "I'll keep working on it." I force my lips to curl upward into a more convincing smile. "I should, ah, get going now. I have another class in a few minutes."

He winks and relaxes back against the bench because he is obviously not overburdened with unresolved feelings of angst. Lucky him. "Have a great afternoon. I'll see you in class, Shaye."

"Thanks...you, too, Professor." My throat is so tight, I can barely squeak out the words. I stuff my journal into my backpack and hoist it over my shoulder. "Have a good day." My feet can't work fast enough to put as much space between us as possible. I feel like I've just been stripped bare, like he could sense exactly what is going on in my mind and in my heart. A tiny part of me wanted him to see it all so I wouldn't have to say anything.

I need help, but I can't get help.

I'm on my own.

And somehow, I feel more alone now in New York, now that I'm actually *in* a relationship, than I ever was when I was in Florida by myself.