



# Beautifully Savage Butterfly (Mafia Bound #2)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Being savage in the ring is one thing. The way Elio Moretti craves my violence outside the ring is another.

I feel like I've been fighting my whole life, and tapping out has never been an option.

I can live with owing money to the Morettis. I can even live with the constant guilt that my brother is the one paralyzed in a hospital bed while I live his dream. What I can't live with is Elio Moretti, second in command to the infamous crime family, showing up to all my fights, sitting in the front row, watching me like he can't look away, and barging into the locker room to patch up my wounds and invade my space.

The Morettis are monsters. Vicious, brutal sociopaths. So, why is Elio so eager to get on his knees for me?

He's as desperate to give up control as I am to take it, but is giving in to these primal urges enough of a reason to sell my soul?

He claims there are worse people in this city than his family, and the deeper I get dragged into his world, the more true that's starting to seem. Can I really fall in love with a Mafia underboss? Is it even possible to walk away?

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# Page 1

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## Chapter 1

### ELIO

The smell of sweat and cheap beer is so strong in the air that I can taste it. The roar of voices around me forms a deafening cacophony of jeers, hoots, and frenzied whooping, thousands of people drunk on bloodlust and borrowed adrenaline. I bounce one knee, tuning out the sounds around me and willing the man pinned to the mat to tap out already so this fight will end. I'm positive I'm not the only one thinking it. It's all well and good to watch a couple of up-and-comers wail on each other for a few minutes, but the arena isn't sold out tonight for Vulture Robinson and Timothy LaMonte.

We're all here for one reason.

The bell dings and the ref jumps in to break up the fight. Vulture holds his arms up in victory, a dribble of blood trickling down his chin, a savage, wild look in his eyes. The crowd cheers again, but my eyes are already fixed on the tunnel to the left of the ring, the dimly lit passageway that leads to the locker rooms.

"Give him another year and that kid is going to be worth some money." Sal elbows me and jerks his head towards Vulture, who's still eating up the attention, strutting around the ring like a prize cock.

"Assuming he'll play ball," Alessio mutters from my other side, leaning back in his seat and spreading his legs obnoxiously wide. He slings an arm over the back of my chair and I huff, scoffing at the pointed reminder of the biggest thorn in our side

lately. Well, one of the biggest thorns.

More of an annoyance, if I'm being honest, since unlike the Fitzpatricks or the Sleepless Reapers, this problem isn't any kind of threat. It's lost income, which is downright boring when you think about all the people who would love to see us dead. To be fair, the feeling is mutual.

Vulture glances in our direction and his lips pull into a slow, bloody grin before he finally leaves the ring.

"Oh yeah, he'll be a good boy and take the payday if and when we offer it," Sal says confidently.

A good boy . The words send a hot shiver up my spine. I can imagine the look on Orion's face if I suggest to him that he should 'be a good boy and take the money.' Murderous, violent, fucking furious . He would tear me from limb to limb like a junkyard dog finally getting a hold of something to sink its teeth into. My cock swells at the thought, my breath lodging itself stubbornly in my chest as a prickle of sweat forms on the back of my neck.

The lights dim and a spotlight illuminates the tunnel. The frenzy in the crowd around me kicks up into something even wilder. Is this what it was like at the Colosseum in Rome? Thousands of people salivating for the catharsis of someone else's blood and violence? I'd be willing to bet that damn near one hundred percent of the people in this room have never made anyone else bleed, never broken someone's bones just to hear the satisfying crunch, and they wouldn't even if given the chance. But that doesn't stop them from screaming for exactly that. They crave the intrinsic beauty found in destruction, they just don't have the balls to do it themselves.

"Oh good, we didn't miss it." Sparrow and Xaviaro claim the empty seats at the end of our row. I'm not sure I even bother to nod or grunt in greeting.

Any other time, I might give them shit for showing up just in time to see the headline fight when we all know it's bound to last less than five minutes, but I leave it to Salvatore to give them a hard time. I'm too busy staring down the illuminated tunnel, holding my breath. Waiting.

And then he's there. Even outside of the ring, there's an unmistakable swagger to the way he moves. It's fluid and slinking, like there's something primitive and predatory inside him that the rest of us will never understand. His lean, powerful muscles are on full display in nothing but a pair of tight green shorts that wrap around his thighs, barely containing the flex of them with each step he takes. He pauses at the mouth of the tunnel and clenches his hands, like he'd rather not be wearing the black gloves at all. Like if it were his choice, he would opt to feel the give of his opponent's flesh under his knuckles with each blow. His dark blond hair is pulled into a tight bun at the base of his neck, but I know it won't last long. Soon, it'll be hanging in sweaty tendrils around his face, possibly flecked with blood as he breathes heavily, his muscles coiling and springing back with the fast, furious hits he's known for.

Everything inside of me vibrates. My ass is teetering right on the edge of my chair, my eyes glued to Orion as he enters the ring.

Look at me , I plead silently, craving the fleeting inferno his eyes never fail to ignite inside of me. Like he wants to kill me where I stand. My cock gets even harder at the thought, and I'm well aware that there must be something severely fucked inside of my head for his contempt to be such a turn on. Then again, being the second in command of the infamous Moretti Crime Family was never a recipe for good mental health.

His eyes sweep in my direction and land on me, his lips curling into a sneer that sends an electric jolt through me. His attention only lasts a fraction of a second, but those bared teeth and the flash of feral hatred has me clenching my fists to keep from shoving my hand down my pants right here, in the front row at an MMA fight, with

friends and family crowded around me on either side.

Jesus, I need a fucking drink. But no way am I going to walk away and miss a second of this. It's better than porn. Hell, it's better than most sex.

Orion stands in the middle of the ring, facing his opponent, Quinn Cabrerra. Quinn is pushing the weight class, clearly stacked with more solid muscle, but Orion's style is anything but brute force. It's patience, it's calculation, it's fucking poetry written with his fists.

The bell rings and Quinn makes the same mistake everyone seems to with Orion. He rushes in, all flying fists and swinging legs, convinced that a quick takedown is the best way to finally end his unbeaten streak. Orion is stoic, but fast, dodging most of the blows and refusing to give Quinn a reaction to the few that he manages to land.

"Oof," Alessio grunts sympathetically beside me, flinching with his whole body when Quinn's foot connects with Orion's gut.

I'm as still and unblinking as Orion is though. He doesn't so much as exhale too sharply, psyching Quinn out as much as biding his time, waiting for him to tire himself out.

"Break his fucking nose," Sparrow screams. In my peripheral vision, I can see that he's standing on his chair even though we're seated in the front row with no one to see over.

I dart my tongue out to taste the anticipation in the air—the sweet, hot flavor of adrenaline that's thick all around us. I let myself imagine I can taste the drops of sweat beading on Orion's chest. I've watched him fight so many times, I feel like I'm inside his head, sharing his steady, thundering heartbeat, counting the seconds with him, and watching every one of Quinn's reactions. I can sense the moment the air

shifts around Orion, his relative stillness becoming less of a mind game and more of a threat.

And then he's on Quinn in the blink of an eye. I swear there's a communal gasp from a thousand people all at once, followed by the eruption of incoherent, frenzied shouts. All I can hear are the hollow thuds of each blow Orion lands though, one after another, so fast Quinn is too dazed to respond to them all. I'm mesmerized by the flex of Orion's muscles, the swell of his biceps, and the ripple and clench of his back and shoulders.

My dick aches and so does my ass. I shift in my seat, indulging in the fantasy of being bruised and sore from having Orion hold me down and spank me until I cry.

I'm out of my chair, shouting and cheering right along with everyone else in the arena. There's no real money to be made tonight, not when Orion's win is a sure thing, but no one seems to mind. We're all too caught up in the perfection of pure, senseless violence.

Orion gets Quinn down on the ground, and they grapple for a minute or two. Quinn doesn't stand a chance, blood clouding his vision, his movements getting tired and sluggish while Orion only seems to get stronger and more determined.

And then it's over. Quinn's tap out is almost anticlimactic after all that. Something tells me Orion thinks so too, his chest still heaving and his eyes still wild, like he could go another ten rounds, like he wants to go another ten rounds. He hasn't purged all the violence inside of himself yet, but the fight is over anyway.

My nipples tighten and the hair on the back of my neck stands up, goose bumps rising all over my skin, hidden under my long sleeves and completely out of place in the humid building. I'd be happy to give him a productive outlet for the demons he didn't manage to exorcise inside the ring.

Too bad I already know the answer he'll give me if I make the offer. Not that it will stop me. The humiliation of being turned down by Orion over and over again is becoming its own kink.

"Elio," Salvatore calls after me. I wave dismissively, letting him know they don't need to wait for me, and I make my way through the crowd, keeping one eye on Orion until he disappears down the tunnel again.

## ORION

My pulse rushes loudly in my ears, my muscles still coiled and quivering for more. I want to find a punching bag and wail on it until I've finished bleeding out this feeling through bruised knuckles and pure fucking exhaustion.

Instead, I'm forced to grunt out responses to reporters shoving cameras and microphones into my face while trying to pretend I feel the least bit human so soon after a fight. I drag a towel over my face to mop up the sweat, and when I pull it away, I notice a few streaks of blood soaking into the white terrycloth. Mine? Quinn's? I won't know until I actually get some goddamn peace to clean myself up, but it's not like it matters much one way or the other. I'm no stranger to blood. I've been bathed in it for as long as I can remember.

When the press clears out, the quiet of the empty locker room rings as loud as an alarm in my ears, almost as unsettling as all the voices and questions were just a few minutes ago. I sit on the bench in front of a row of lockers meant for a whole team of athletes to crowd around, snapping towels and playing grab ass, doing whatever it is they do to celebrate a win. Me? I eye the door, my jaw set so rigidly it's giving me a headache, waiting for the inevitable.

Maybe instead of sitting around, I should throw some clothes on, sweat and blood be damned, and get the fuck out of here. But I can't seem to make myself move. I feel

like a victim in a horror movie, everything inside screaming at me to run while I stand around like an idiot. Waiting. Waiting. Waiting...

I don't flinch at the light rap at the door. I don't call out a greeting either. I don't need to. He's not asking for permission to come in. Guys like him don't know how to ask for permission, they only know how to take. My jaw clenches even tighter and I scramble to my feet, refusing to let him see me waiting for him. I put my back to the door, my towel slung over my shoulder as I rummage in my locker.

"In case you ever wondered, it's considered polite in society to wait for the person on the other side of the door to actually invite you inside after you knock," I growl at the shifting air that lets me know I'm no longer alone.

His low chuckle is the most grating sound I've ever heard in my life. Just like everything else about the man, it's fucking privilege personified. I'm not sure how someone's laugh can sound like a fucking ten-thousand-dollar suit, but his does.

"Is that right?" Elio drawls in a bored tone. "I guess I need to learn some manners."

Goddamn right he does.

Elio fucking Moretti. I doubt he's been told 'no' a single day of his life. Pompous prick that he is. Handed an empire of violence on a solid gold platter, and he expects us all to kneel like his loyal subjects. Fat fucking chance of that happening. I don't kneel for anyone, least of all a goddamn spoiled Mafia prince.

I turn slowly to face him, hating the way my eyes rake over him from head to toe just once, taking in his rumpled, unbuttoned suit jacket and the piece strapped across his chest. His olive skin is flushed, and his hands are shoved into his pockets, his gaze roaming over me in a much slower assessment.



I cross my arms over my chest, vaguely aware of how naked I still am in nothing but my shorts. I don't pretend to know how sociopaths and mobsters like the Morettis operate, but I learned early in my life that whether you're staring down a hungry dog or a gang of street thugs, you don't want to be the one to blink first.

"What do you want?" I've asked the same question after every fight within the city limits for the past two years. The dance has become so familiar, it might be comforting if it weren't so unsettling.

Unsettling, because no matter how many times I've asked, I still don't know what Elio Moretti wants from me.

A smile spreads slowly over his lips, his dark brown eyes boring into mine. He darts his tongue out and runs it along his bottom lip, tilting his head as he gives me another leisurely perusal.

"A lesson in manners?" he answers, but it sounds more like a question. It sounds hopeful, but exactly what he's hoping for is still un-fucking-clear.

I scoff through my nose. "Great. I'll dig out some Miss Manners articles before my next fight and have them ready for you. Anything else I can do for you? I already told three different Moretti stooges that I don't want your fucking money to throw a fight."

My rant seems to amuse him. The wider his grin gets, the more my muscles tense, until I'm sure he can see me vibrating, holding myself back from slamming him up against the nearest wall, getting in his face, and demanding to know what the fuck he wants already. Why is he up my ass like clockwork after every fight? Why am I seeing him out of the corner of my eye on the goddamn street? What exactly do the Morettis want from me?

My breath is coming faster the more I think about it. My lungs burn and the tightness in my gut is beyond ready to explode, but unlike in the ring, there's nowhere for these feelings to go. Not if I want to live to see another day, anyway.

And that right there is what I think I hate the most about Elio goddamned Moretti. He shows up here, getting under my skin, crawling inside my head and messing with me, and I can't fucking touch him.

"I'm going to make it really fucking clear for you," I spit, stepping over the bench and crowding in on him. I expect Elio to take a step back, but he holds his ground, putting us nearly nose to nose when I get in his face. "I don't want anything more to do with you or your fucking family. I'll pay you the money I owe you, but I don't want to be watched by you, I don't want you at my fights. Stay away from me."

He's breathing faster now too, his pupils dilated and his lips parted wordlessly. Something dangerous crackles between us, and the sliver of self-preservation I have tells me that if I don't back off, I'm going to end up nothing more than a rotting corpse, piled on top of the bodies of anyone else who dared speak this way to a Moretti.

I pull the towel off of my shoulder and throw it at Elio for good measure, hoping it will get my point across. I know better than that though.

However I landed on Elio Moretti's radar to begin with, I'm fucked now.

Story of my fucking life.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:17 pm*

### Chapter 2

#### ORION

My heart thunders and I resist the urge to look over my shoulder as I step into the grungy shower stall. There's something black and fuzzy growing in the upper left corner of the cramped space that I'd rather not look at. As gross as it is though, it's preferable to giving in to the prickling feeling on the back of my neck, the terrified animal sense clawing at my skin, telling me to turn around and make sure Elio isn't standing there with his gun pointed right at me.

I grind my molars together and crank the water a few degrees hotter. How fucking dare he? I've been fighting for survival almost as long as I can remember, learning to use my fists as soon as I could, selling off parts of myself until rage was the only thing left. And now an asshole like Elio thinks he has the right to get in my head and make me feel like I need to look over my shoulder? Absolutely not.

The scalding water beats down on my aching muscles, searing the spots that are already bruising from Cabrerra's fists. I poke a finger into the tender purple splotch blooming across the bottom edge of my ribs. Nothing feels broken. At least, not broken enough to warrant anything more than wrapping it before I crash later.

I roll my neck from side to side and groan at the tug of my tight muscles. I would sell my soul for a hot bath and a massage. Jesus, what a fucking luxury that would be. I close my eyes and indulge in the fantasy for half a second, imagining a laughable dream world where instead of cleaning up in this biohazard of a shower just to avoid a mobster, I get to go home to a hot bath and an eager lover. Instead of wrapping my

injuries myself, a beautiful man would tend to me with adoration and submission in his eyes, kissing my bruises and massaging the knots out of my muscles while I whisper hot, filthy things to him.

I groan a second time, the sound painful as it works its way through my throat. Fantasies like that are dangerous. A life like that is for other people, not for me. I learned that a long time ago. Some people are dealt nothing but shit—that's just life.

I slam my hand back down on the nozzle, killing the water. It's jarring how quickly the stream stops, leaving me standing, shivering in a draining puddle. My hair clings to my neck and shoulders in wet clumps. I didn't think to bring a towel with me during my storm out, so I'm forced to do a sopping wet walk of shame now, hoping Elio took the hint and fucked off in the last few minutes.

Leaving a trail of footprints through the bathroom, I snatch my shorts off of the floor and step back into the main part of the locker room. It's empty, no trace of the Mafia prince aside from the lingering agitation that refuses to release its hold on me.

“ A lesson in manners? ” His words earlier echo in my head while I grab a clean towel to dry myself off.

If I didn't know any better, I might have thought he was flirting. Flirting like a bratty sub, looking to be taught a lesson. My cock perks up at the thought. I scoff to myself, running a hand over my face and shaking my head to clear the momentary insanity. Elio fucking Moretti is not a subby brat begging for a spanking, he's a goddamn killer.

I get dressed in the same jeans and faded band t-shirt I wore on my way in earlier, when I was buzzing with the adrenaline of an upcoming fight. Now everything feels too quiet, like the crash after an intense high.

I wind my hair up into a bun on top of my head and sling my bag over my shoulder before shoving my feet into my ratty old tennis shoes. I shuffle out of the locker room with knots in my stomach, dragging my feet and immediately feeling guilty about it.

It's not that I don't want to see him. Of course I do. He's my flesh and blood, and I'm not even sure I'd still be breathing if it weren't for him. It's just that some nights, like after a fight, it all feels like too much. All I want to do is go home and fall into bed, pretend for twelve hours or so that I'm the badass MMA champion everyone else thinks I am. But there's no question what I'll choose. Blowing off Jack isn't even an option.

I stuff my hands into the pockets of my jeans and square my shoulders as I step out onto the street. The arena isn't on the best side of town. Hell, eighty percent of Wildcliff is the bad side of the city. Unless you've got a hell of a lot of zeros in your bank account, you're stuck slumming it. The scrawny twelve-year-old inside me has the urge to hurry down the street, avoid looking down any alleyways, keep my head down, and get out of here as quickly as possible. I'm not that kid anymore though, and I'm not afraid of this city. She's done her worst to me, and I'm still here.

It's a handful of blocks to the towering cement building that sits right on the corner, with a brief detour to pick up some burgers from Jack's favorite place. There are overgrown flowerbeds on either side of the steps up to the door, and graffiti that's been hastily scrubbed off the side of the building. The words 'Shady Oaks' are written above the door. There isn't a tree in sight, but okay. I pull open the door and step into the familiar lobby, squinting as my eyes adjust to the harsh fluorescent lights.

The woman behind the reception desk smiles at me, the skin around her eyes crinkling with well-earned smile lines that give away her age, no matter how often she touches up her graying roots.

“I’m glad you came by. Jack has been in a mood all day. He’ll be happy to see you,” she says, adding to the guilt writhing in my gut.

I force a smile, reaching for the sign-in sheet on the counter and jotting my name down in a messy scrawl.

“He’ll be glad to see a cheeseburger, that’s for sure,” I say, and she laughs, waving me back without bothering with any other formalities, like reminding me about when visiting hours end. I’m here four nights a week—I know the rules and schedules like the back of my hand. I could walk the path to Jack’s room with my eyes closed and a concussion. I think I actually did do that after one particularly brutal fight.

I tap on the door to Jack’s room, a pattern of three knocks that we established when we were teenagers squatting in an abandoned apartment building.

“Yeah,” he grunts, which I take to mean, ‘Come in, dear brother. Thank you so much for bringing dinner and always thinking of me.’ Not that I blame him for being a crabby asshole from time to time. Fuck knows if I were in his position, I’d have a much worse attitude than he does.

I step inside and hold up the bag from Reggie’s with a grin, refusing to wince at the twinge in my bruised ribs that accompanies the motion. He’s lying in his bed, the curtains on the windows drawn, the stale smell of sweat and antiseptic filling the room. The place looks homey, at least. Which was the main reason I even agreed to it when he said he wanted to live here instead of staying with me. It’s basically a studio apartment with a living room set up, an old flatscreen TV hanging on the far wall, a small kitchen, and his bed. There are table lamps, cozy rugs, and a vase of flowers that I’m sure one of his nurses brought for him. But no matter how welcoming it is, there’s no denying what this place is, or why my brother is here.

“Victory burgers.” I grin and shrug my bag off my shoulder, dropping it by the door

and setting the bag down on the counter. “Do you want to stay there, or do you want help into your chair?”

Jack frowns. “Bed is fine. You don’t need to be picking up my bullshit, useless body and carrying me around like a ragdoll after a fight.”

“Dude, I’ll wear you on my back Yoda-style during a fight if you want me to,” I say, while still respecting his decision and pulling a chair up next to his bed so I can take a seat there.

His sour look melts into a momentary smile. My lips twitch in a matching grin and I reach into the bag to pull out one of the burgers. I unwrap it and hold it up to his mouth. He scoffs under his breath but takes a bite anyway, chewing slowly.

There aren’t a lot of blessings to count in this situation, but the fact that he can still eat and breathe more or less on his own is in that column, as far as I’m concerned. If the damage had been one vertebra higher, he’d be eating through tubes and stuck on a ventilator.

“Tell me about the fight tonight,” he says once he swallows.

“Come on, you don’t want to hear about it.” He asks every time, and it never stops feeling downright wrong to give him a literal blow-by-blow of every fight when he’s supposed to be the one out there making headlines and signing sponsorship contracts. He’s the one with the boy-next-door good looks and all the charm. I feel like a little kid wearing shoes five sizes too big.

“Let me live vicariously,” he insists, then opens his mouth for another bite.

I sigh and give in, sharing the burger with him while I tell him about every detail of the fight. Of course, I leave out the visit from Elio that came after. Jack doesn’t need

to know that even my fat fight paychecks aren't enough to cover the cost of keeping him here with nurses on call twenty-four hours a day. He doesn't need to know that I broke the pact we made a decade ago about never getting mixed up with the Morettis, no matter how bad things might get. He doesn't need to know that I lie awake at night, wondering how much longer I'll even be able to fight and where I'll get the money to keep paying the medical bills after that.

Maybe I'm being a stubborn idiot, refusing to take a payout from the Morettis. I can't keep up this winning streak forever, right? Sooner or later, I'm going to lose a fight, and it would be pretty damn nice to make a cool million for it. I grit my teeth at the thought though, my pride rearing up and thrashing inside me like an untamed beast.

Taking a dive is apparently the limit of what I'll do to take care of my brother. At least, as long as I have other options.

We finish the burgers and spend another hour talking bullshit until Jack falls asleep. It's past visiting hours, but no one hassles me on my way out. There's no shortage of pity and special treatment for a thirty-five-year-old quadriplegic and his scrappy younger brother who's literally fighting to support him. That's some movie-of-the-week shit right there. Too bad there's no happy ending to be had here.

ELIO

My footsteps echo eerily in my empty apartment. I sway, bracing my hand against the door to keep my balance until the room stops spinning. It's possible I had a few too many drinks after slinking out of the locker room earlier, words stuck in my throat as I watched Orion disappear in a rage after throwing his towel at me.

The towel ...

A sloppy grin spreads over my lips at the same slow pace as the tendrils of heat that



weave their way through my veins. I slip a hand inside my suit jacket and pull out the folded towel. The droplets of blood that came from Orion's split lip are rusty brown now, the cloth almost entirely dry after a couple of hours spent tucked under my jacket. This is a new low, I'm well aware of that. But that doesn't stop me from bringing the towel to my nose and inhaling deeply.

The musky scent of his sweat fills the back of my throat and makes my head spin. I moan, my dick swelling rapidly. I sag against the door, using one hand to undo my belt while I hold the towel to my nose with the other. My eyes flutter closed, and I imagine having my face buried in the crook of Orion's neck, feeling the slickness of his sweat after a fight, lapping at his salty skin with slow strokes of my tongue until he's moaning and twisting his fingers roughly in my hair.

I shove my hand down the front of my pants and wrap it around the base of my thick, throbbing cock, drunk on whiskey and Orion's scent, but most of all drunk on the fantasy of his hatred turning into passion. The door rattles at my back with the frantic pace of my hand on my cock, rough and unlubed, with just enough bite to keep me right on edge without tipping me over right away.

I grunt and gasp, the sounds muffled by the towel still pressed to my face. My balls tighten and Orion's cold green eyes dance behind my eyelids, set in a harsh glare that makes me more desperate to please him every time he turns all that disapproval on me. I want to crawl on my knees for him. I want to hurt for him. I want to see his rage shift into desire until he can't do anything but put his hands all over me, mark me with his bruises, fucking claim me.

I groan, curling my toes inside of my shoes and wrenching the towel away from my nose to shove it down my pants. I replace my hand with it, squirming and panting at the rough feeling of terrycloth on my throbbing cock, working myself harder and faster.

“Orion. Orion. Orion ,” I murmur his name over and over, my hips snapping helplessly as I fuck the towel, the flavor of his sweat still thick on my tongue, mixing with the smooth taste of whiskey that’s lingering there. “Please,” I rasp, throwing my head back to bang against the heavy door and letting out a howl as my orgasm punches through me.

I fuck into the towel, shivering at the odd satisfaction of spilling all over something Orion pressed against his bare skin only a few hours ago. The image of his disgust and disapproval fills my mind, twisting my gut with burning hot shame that only makes me come harder, weakening my knees and clenching around my balls until I’m completely spent and out of breath.

I slide down the door until my ass hits the floor, one hand still shamefully down my pants, my chest heaving with my ragged breaths.

So much for being the big, bad second in command of the biggest crime family in the city. Too drunk to stand up, getting off on humiliation and pure goddamn contempt... Elio fucking Moretti, ladies and gentlemen.

I yank the towel out of my pants, wad it up, and toss it lazily aside. Now that the heat of the moment has passed, I kind of hate myself for ruining it. Then again, what was I going to do with it? Sleep with Orion’s sweaty towel tucked against my face like a security blanket? There’s a twinge in my chest at the thought.

Jesus, I am beyond pathetic.

I fumble in my pocket and pull out my phone, not giving any thought to who I’m calling until the familiar sound of my brother’s voice fills my ear.

“What’s wrong?” His voice is rough with sleep but already alert, ready for whatever horror I might be calling about in the middle of the night.

“Nothing,” I answer, and I hear an exhale of relief, followed by the faint shuffling of fabric. His bedsheets? Probably. “Do you ever just wonder what it would have been like to be a normal kid? Like, not raised knowing we were going to inherit an empire of blood and money?”

Enzo is quiet for several seconds, but I can hear him breathing, I swear I can practically hear him thinking, turning the question over, looking for the right answer to it. As if there is a right one.

“You’re drunk,” he says eventually, and I snort.

“Still a good question.” I clumsily get to my feet again, bracing one hand against the door to help in the process.

“No, I don’t. We are who we are, there’s no changing that.” He’s full of the kind of certainty I would fucking kill for if I thought shedding blood over the matter might solve anything.

“Everyone thinks we’re monsters,” I mutter, shuffling through my apartment, flipping on lights on my way to the bar cart parked in the corner of my living room.

I pick up an expensive bottle of whiskey that Alessio gave me for Christmas last year and uncap it, bringing it to my lips to take a swig. It doesn’t even burn on the way down, which is a sure sign I’ve had enough. I take a second swig anyway, then drag my tongue over my lips.

“So let them think we’re monsters. You and I both know there are worse boogie men out there than either of us.” The venom in his words sends a shiver down my spine. “Do you want me to come over?” he offers more softly a second later.

“No. I’m going to sleep.” I wasn’t actually planning on it until the words left my

mouth, but it sounds like a pretty damn good idea now that I think about it.

“Okay. Night, fratello . Don’t forget we have a meeting tomorrow. If tonight turns into one of your three-day drinking binges, I’ll have Salvatore so far up your ass you won’t be able to sit down,” he says, and I chuckle.

Salvatore is the best threat he can come up with? Half the time our cousin ends up just as drunk as I am when he’s meant to be wringing me out. Enzo’s only solution is to pass me off to someone else. Alessio is too nice about it, making me scrambled eggs and putting cold compresses on the back of my neck, and Xaviaro is in the middle of the two of them, acting like everything is fine while I puke into a bucket next to his couch.

It’s fine. I don’t need any of them to babysit me anyway. I don’t need anyone around to shove me back into line when I stumble or spank my ass when I’m feeling out of control. I don’t need someone to see right through me and somehow know when I need to be coddled and when I need something rougher to help me get my head back on straight.

Even if I did need those things, the only man I want them from hates my fucking guts. There may be worse monsters in this city than us, but as far as Orion is concerned, I might as well be Satan himself.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:17 pm*

### Chapter 3

#### ELIO

The thumping beat of the music from inside the club throbs in my eardrums as I near the door. The bouncer sees me coming and practically falls over himself, grabbing the door handle to pull it open before it's even finished swinging closed behind the last group of people who entered. I button my suit jacket with one hand and nod to him in thanks.

I think his name is Gio? Rio? Something that rolls right off the tongue like that. At least that's the exact pickup line Alessio purred at him a few weeks ago. Not sure if that night ended with the towering doorman using all those bouncer muscles of his to manhandle Les or not.

He gives me a polite smile, but I notice the tick at the corner of his lips that gives away a slight case of nerves. He might be six and a half feet tall and chiseled out of pure stone, but he's as scared of The Family as everyone else in this city.

"Sir," he says, tilting his head as I pass.

I stifle the urge to snort at the honorific. Sir ? I've never been a sir . I can hardly even take anyone seriously when they refer to me as Mr. Moretti. My father was Mr. Moretti, and Lorenzo is definitely Mr. Moretti. Me, though? Not so much.

"Elio," I correct, even though I know it won't change anything. He probably thinks it's a test, like if he actually addresses me as 'Elio' the next time we meet, I'll shoot

him in the head.

My heart thuds in time with the pounding, sultry bass as I make my way through the club. Wild is Enzo's pet project—the first and only all male strip club in the state. Clearly it was a good bet, because the place is packed night after night, regardless of what day of the week it is.

On the main stage, our most popular dancer, Dante, is working the pole in a pair of obscenely tight leather shorts. His ass cheeks hang out the bottom of them as he bends forward and shakes it, eliciting a round of horny cheers from the men clamoring to crawl up on the stage and worship the ground the little spitfire walks on. One of them makes the mistake of reaching for Dante as he struts close to the edge of the stage, unbuttoning his shorts and teasing the crowd with a peek at the lacy thong he appears to be wearing underneath. He dodges the man's grasp, then slams his foot down, pinning the groper's hand to the stage and grinding it under the heel of his shoe with a sweet smirk that's completely at odds with the yelp his action elicits, loud enough to be audible over the music.

I can read the words, “ No touching, baby ,” on Dante's lips.

I grin and keep walking, ignoring the way my brain hammers against the inside of my skull thanks to last night's overindulgence, and the flutter of impatience already building in my gut to get this meeting over with so I can make it across town in time.

I'm the last to arrive at our usual table in the back corner of the club. It's a spot with a perfect view of the main stage, but out of the way enough that no one is going to be eavesdropping on our conversations. Not that many people would have the sheer balls or stupidity to try.

Enzo is sitting with his back to the wall, looking every bit the Mafia Don, with an air of command that hangs around him effortlessly, a don't-fuck-with-me stare, and a

crisp black Armani suit that cost as much as some cars. The chair on his right is empty, waiting for me to claim it. The metaphor is too obvious and boring to even bother acknowledging. On his left, Salvatore is seated, wearing a deep purple suit tonight, with a black-and-gold vest underneath. It would be a joke on most people, but he always manages to look like he belongs on the cover of GQ . Across from Sal, Alessio is leaning back in his chair, his feet up on the table, his suit jacket unbuttoned. I can't imagine anyone else daring to flout the Moretti image so blatantly, especially right in front of Lorenzo, but Les operates under a different set of rules than most people under my brother's command. There's a certain amount of privilege that comes with being childhood friends, I suppose. No one knows that better than Xaviaro—trigger man, enforcer, Moretti Family hitman, and Enzo's best friend. He's on Alessio's left side, earning his nickname, Iceman, with a steely expression on his face that dares anyone to fucking try him. And finally, the newest addition to our inner circle, the unhinged little murderer Xaviaro went and fell in love with, Sparrow.

My brother notices my approach, looking me over slowly, no doubt searching for any signs that I'm still drunk after that call last night. His attention on me causes the rest of the guys to lift their heads or swivel in their chairs as well, five sets of eyes boring into me, trying to read my fucking blood alcohol like they expect it to be printed across my damn forehead. I resist the urge to give them all the finger. It's not like I'm an alcoholic.

"I'd assure you all that I'm as sober as a judge, but I think we all know there are a few too many judges in Wildcliff who keep a bottle of Scotch in their top desk drawer," I quip, patting Xaviaro on the back as I pass him, not sure if I'm hoping to get an icy scowl from him or if I'm angling to earn a few growly, possessive threats from Sparrow.

When my hand lands on him, I feel a strange knot under his clothes. I drag my fingers curiously along the protrusion. Is it a rope? A harness? Xaviaro shrugs me off and

Sparrow tilts his head, flashing me a threatening, toothy grin.

“Is there a reason you’re pawing at what’s mine?” he asks with too much sweetness in his voice. If I hadn’t lost any sense of fear and self-preservation decades ago, I might shiver at the implied threat in his sugary tone.

“Bold claim, little bird.” I smile right back at him. “Do you have a leash you use to lead Xav around by his dick?”

The only reaction Xaviaro has to my crude statement is a slight hitch in one eyebrow.

“Jealous?” Sparrow asks. “Wishing someone would buy a dick leash for you too?”

I make an attempt to scoff at the suggestion, but the sound comes out too tight and strangled to actually get my point across. He leans back in his seat looking smug and satisfied, and I fumble to come up with a retort, even though I’m well aware it’s already been too long to fire back with any dignity.

“Can we put a pin in any further discussions of kinks and fetishes and get down to business? Or is that too much to ask?” Lorenzo asks dryly.

“Honestly, talking about kinks sounds more interesting.” Alessio shrugs and rocks his chair back onto its back legs. “I definitely noticed Sal panting when Dante did that routine last week where he wore nothing but a pair of cowboy boots and a riding crop.”

“Fuck off,” Sal mutters, and I think I notice a blush creeping over his cheeks even in the dim lighting of our cozy corner.

“Oh, are we supposed to talk about our own kinks?” Alessio flashes a shit-eating grin. “In that case, I keep having this wet dream where...”



My brother clears his throat, cutting off whatever horny description Les was about to launch into, and leveling him with a look that makes it clear playtime is over. As hard as he pushes the limits at times, he's not a fucking idiot. He has the good grace to look mildly sheepish as he snaps his mouth closed and lowers his chair back onto all four legs, putting his own feet on the floor and sitting up properly.

Enzo gestures towards my seat. I reach up to loosen my tie a fraction, then round the table to claim my place on his right side. Underboss and second in command. Successor to the Moretti throne if shit ever goes sideways and Lorenzo ends up ice cold on a slab in the morgue. I shudder at the thought, and not just because it hits too close to home.

There's a comfort to the familiar cadence of the meeting once it gets going. There's an accounting of the books, new business to discuss, like the bar that opened last week a couple of blocks over, and whose knees Xav had to break this week, and finally old business, which tonight mainly consists of Sparrow giving us an update about his continued surveillance of the Sleepless Reapers motorcycle club. I've been sitting in meetings exactly like this for as long as I can remember, since Enzo and I were both perched on our father's lap as he casually ordered people killed and money collected.

Even then, as a barefoot five-year-old, I can remember people treating me like some kind of royalty. Everyone was afraid to deny us anything, and we ate that shit up like a pair of tiny dictators while our father reveled in it. Nothing gave him a bigger laugh than watching grown men piss themselves trying to keep a couple of spoiled Mafia kids happy. My lips twitch at the memory. I can't help but wonder what it would feel like for someone to not give a fuck that I'm a Moretti, though. For someone to treat me as something other than a fragile bomb, bound to detonate at any moment. The memory of Orion getting up in my face last night sears through my veins and makes my pulse speed up.

“I think that’s everything,” Enzo says. “Unless anyone has anything else to bring up?”

No one volunteers anything, which means this meeting is officially over. I push my sleeve up an inch to check my watch, standing up at the same time. Mentally, I’m already halfway to the parking lot, but unfortunately, physically my brother snags my arm before I can get far.

Enzo stands up too, nudging me off to the side while Alessio launches right back into the conversation about kinks without missing a beat, as if the last hour and a half didn’t just happen.

“How are you doing?” Lorenzo asks in a low tone, letting go of my arm and pinning me in place with his worried, probing gaze instead.

“I’m fine.” I brush the question off. It’s not a complete lie. I’m fine in all the ways my brother needs to concern himself with. I’m sharp and in control, just like I need to be.

He hums, seemingly unconvinced. I’m not sure what he wants from me. I doubt he wants to hear me blather on about the pathetic, one-sided crush I have on Orion Barros. Does he want me to spill my guts to him about how desperately I want to get fucked by someone who won’t act like they’re either a hostage or auditioning for a Mafia version of *The Real Housewives* ? Maybe I want to play the hostage for a change. Again, I suspect that’s the last thing Enzo wants to have a heart to heart about.

“I’m fine,” I say again, hoping my tone sounds more firm than petulant. “I haven’t had a drink all day.” I blow a heavy breath right into his face to prove it to him, and he just scowls. “Look, we both know that this job, this life comes with a hell of a lot of pressure. The occasional glass—”

He scoffs loudly and quirks an eyebrow at me.

“ Bottle ,” I amend, “of whiskey is how I let off some steam. You must have your own way of releasing the pressure valve.”

“Not all of us have the luxury,” he mutters.

“Well, maybe you should work on that.” I shrug and stuff my hands into my pockets.

He doesn’t bother to respond to that suggestion. Not that I expected him to. Maybe I’m deflecting. Maybe I just want to get the hell out of here and indulge in my favorite form of stress relief that doesn’t involve a drop of liquor.

“Why don’t you come home with me tonight? We can order takeout from that Vietnamese place around the corner and watch The Godfather .”

I snort a laugh, letting some of the tension slip from my shoulders.

“How about a rain check? I’ve got a... thing.” I’m not sure if I’ll lie if Enzo tries to pick apart my vagueness. The truth will only lead to more questions and embarrassing answers I don’t really want to give him.

Luckily, he doesn’t ask. He just nods, and I take that as a dismissal, turning on my heel and hustling for the door.

## ORION

My muscles are still tight and sore from the fight last night. The bruise on my ribs has deepened to a dark purple that’s bound to be a neon target tonight. I’m not sure the bandage I wrapped around my ribs is much better. It’s a flashing sign telling my opponent exactly where I’m hurt. But I can’t do anything about it now.

I roll my head one way and then the other, loosening up my neck and focusing on the steady whoosh of my pulse in my ears, drowning out the roar of the gathered crowd and the loud instrumentals of the rock music that's being blasted through the speakers of the underground bar.

Upstairs, there's a perfectly respectable business—an upscale bar situated in the business district of Wildcliff, where anyone can stop in for an overpriced drink after work. But, if you know about the entrance around back, at the end of the unlit alley, and you happen to have the password to give the bouncer, you'll find yourself in an entirely different world.

The smell of weed and cigarette smoke hangs heavily in the air, mixing with the scent of cheap alcohol and stale sweat. I drag in a slow, deep breath and block all of that out too.

Last night, I was a celebrity, or at least the closest thing to one. MMA is a brutal sport, but there are still rules, there are referees and press. There are bright lights and medics standing by if the need should arise. But tonight? Tonight is the human equivalent of a cock fight. Brutal, messy, dangerous. I could end up injured or in a bed just like Jack's. If the cops were to show up—fat chance here in Wildcliff, honestly—I could be arrested. I could even end up banned from the Ultimate Fighting League for participating in an underground fight. Or I could walk away with a fistful of untaxed cash. That's money I can use to pay down some of my debt to Elio and his big brother.

“You're up.” The man with a bad combover and a stained t-shirt whose name I can't remember gives me a little shove between the shoulders to push me towards the makeshift ring.

I grit my teeth, flexing my wrapped hands into fists. No gloves in a fight like this, just knuckles on flesh and bone. I step into the roped-off circle in the middle of the room.

It's the only spot in the bar with a light hanging directly overhead, illuminating the wooden floor stained with blood from past fights.

A big fucker steps over the rope on the opposite side. He's a head taller, with at least seventy-five pounds on me. There's a jagged scar down one of his cheeks, and two teardrop tattoos on the other. He flashes a smile, and I notice his canine teeth are capped with sharp silver fangs. If points were awarded for intimidation factor, he would be the one walking out of here with the payout tonight. I stare right back at him, stoic and unblinking. Unfortunately for him, it's not about how scary you look, it's about how savage you are. And he's about to find out that size isn't everything.

A bell rings from somewhere unseen, and every ounce of my attention snaps into crystalline focus. The whistling, jeering drunks surrounding the two of us don't exist anymore. There's nothing but the taste of adrenaline on my tongue and the familiar coil of my muscles, eager to hurt just a little bit more if it means bleeding some of this poison from my veins.

Unsurprisingly, he goes right for my bruised ribs, swinging wildly, trying to connect body blows. I'm expecting them though, dodging each one easily, weaving and floating out of his reach, moving so fast it's like my feet aren't even touching the floor. Every one of his missed swings energizes me a little more, amping me up until the beast inside of me is thrashing with bloodlust, hungry to pound him into nothing but crumpled, bloodied flesh.

He realizes his approach isn't working, and redirects his next punch at the last second, managing to catch me off guard. My head snaps to one side as his fist connects with my jaw. The throb of a hit is a familiar, deep ache, rattling my teeth and filling my mouth with the metallic taste of blood. It's the sharp sting that burns across my skin that I'm not prepared for. I reach up tentatively and pull my hand back to find my fingers wet with blood. Asshole must have something sharp stuck in his knuckle wrap.

I narrow my eyes and spit out a mouthful of blood onto the floor, then lunge for him. He isn't prepared for my fist plowing straight into his nose, and as soon as he stumbles back, I use his momentary lack of balance to take out his legs with a kick to his knee. He crumples, and I jump on him, straddling him before he has time to recover. I let my fists fly, a primal, satisfied growl rumbling in my throat as I pummel him. The wet sound of flesh on flesh, the smell of blood in the air, the frenzied screams of the crowd. It's all a blur. The only thing that feels real is the pain radiating through my knuckles with each fresh blow.

I'm vaguely aware of being hauled off of my opponent, whose name I never bothered to learn. Dragging in ragged, heaving breaths, I wipe the back of my hand absently over my jaw, feeling the heat of the blood that's still flowing from the cut. The high of violence slowly starts to fade and the crowd of men around me gradually unblurs, one face in particular coming into sharp focus.

Standing front and center, wearing a suit that's completely out of place in a shithole like this, his dark hair neatly coiffed, looking like he can't decide whether he wants to kill someone or fuck someone... Elio fucking Moretti.

Of fucking course he's here.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:17 pm*

### Chapter 4

#### ELIO

Rage rushes and churns inside of me, pulsing white hot until it tastes like ash on my tongue. I barely register the disdain in Orion's eyes when they land on me, I don't even get a chance to savor and fucking wallow in it. He's hustled out of the makeshift ring in one direction, blood dripping from the slice along his jaw, and his opponent, Timothy Riker, is roughly shoved in the other direction by another large, impatient employee.

As much as I want to follow Orion, to get another hit of the drug I'm so fucking addicted to, there's something I need to take care of first. Timothy's height makes it easy to follow him through the crowd, his head towering above all the others. I shove past the men who are pressing up close to the ring again, salivating for the next round of fighters to enter the ring. Most of them are too drunk or too stupid to recognize me on sight, but the few who do fall over themselves to get out of my way.

Timothy doesn't bother to stop to lick his wounds. He grabs a handful of napkins off the bar as he passes it, not slowing his stride, and heads straight for the stairway that leads back to the alley. By the time he reaches the top of the steps, I'm only a couple of paces behind him, taking the last two stairs at once to close the gap between us.

I grab him by the back of the shirt before he even realizes I'm behind him. It's damp with his sweat, twisting easily in my fist. Jamming my knuckles into his spine, I use the leverage and the element of surprise to swing him into the nearest wall. His reflexes are quick enough that he catches himself with his hands before his already

bloodied face can connect with the rough brick of the building's exterior.

"What the fuck?" he grunts, struggling against me.

I pin him to the wall with my elbow shoved roughly between his shoulder blades, and lean in close to his ear. The salty, metallic taste of blood and the stale smell of the bar cling to him.

"That's exactly what I was going to ask." The humorless laugh I let out sounds menacing even to me, and Timothy struggles harder against my hold. I jam my elbow harder into his back, gritting my teeth as I growl the next words, "What the fuck makes you think you can put goddamn weapons on your knuckles before a fight? What the fuck makes you think you can make Orion bleed like that without paying the price?"

"Are you insane?" His voice is pitched a few octaves higher with the realization that he's not going to be able to throw me off. "It's a no-rules fight. Anything goes."

"The greedy maniacs who organize this shit might not have any rules." I drop my voice lower, quieter, letting every ounce of menace I possess slip into it. "But the Morettis do."

He yelps like a trapped animal and the sour smell of piss fills my nostrils.

"Jesus, I'm sorry. I didn't know Orion was... protected or whatever. Fuck, please, I... I have a kid." His babbled pleas turn him from a vicious fighter into a scared little boy in the blink of an eye.

I chew on the inside of my cheek for a minute, holding him silently in place while I decide what to do with him. The visual of the blood running down Orion's face is still stoking the flames of rage inside of me. But underneath that, I'm a reasonable man.



At least, I like to think I am. With another low growl in my throat, I yank Timothy away from the wall and spin him around to pin him again, so we're face to face this time.

"Orion Barros is protected. Spread the word. The next person who tries to fight him dirty is going to end up with their head splattered against the nearest available surface. Got it?"

He grimaces, the silver fangs he has fitted over his canine teeth glinting in the moonlight as he nods rapidly.

"Good." I let go of him and take a step back, but he doesn't move, still plastered to the wall, not sure if a single twitch of his muscles will end with a bullet between his eyes. "Go," I bark, jerking my head towards the mouth of the alley.

I don't wait around for him to make his escape, smoothing my suit down and turning back towards the entrance. The bouncer is standing silently, his eyes dutifully fixed on the wall. Smart man. He pulls the door open again in a hurry, and I descend the stairs back into the dank bunker of a bar below.

The smell of blood and alcohol hangs heavily in the air. With Timothy dealt with, the only thing on my mind now is finding Orion. Since the alley is the only exit, I know he hasn't left yet. I make my best guess and head towards the bathroom.

I blink in the harsh fluorescent light of the bathroom as I step inside. Sure enough, Orion is standing over the sink, looking at his reflection in the mirror that hangs on the wall over it, rust gathered around the edges. He's holding a paper towel against his jaw, scowling before he even notices me standing behind him. His eyes flicker to mine and the furrow between his eyebrows deepens, his lips curling into a snarl.

"Nice fight."

He narrows his eyes at me, but before he can respond, the stall door a few feet away swings open and a drunk man stumbles out. My patience is already hanging on by a fucking thread tonight, the tension that gathered in my shoulders when I saw the blood bloom across Orion's face during the fight still lingering. I flick the button on my suit jacket open and reach for my holstered pistol in one quick motion.

"Get the fuck out." My tone is cold as ice, and the drunk's eyes go wide. He holds one hand up in surrender and books it for the bathroom door, doing up his belt with his other hand on his way out.

I tuck my gun away and turn my attention back to Orion, catching his eyes through the reflection in the mirror again. They're harsh, dancing with bitter disdain that makes my heart race and my cock swell.

"That easy, huh?" he scoffs, dabbing his cut again before pulling the paper towel away and wadding it up in his hand. "You wave a gun around and people do whatever the fuck you want? Does that make you feel like a big man?" He spins around to face me, the harsh words ricocheting through me like a slap.

"I wasn't going to shoot him," I mutter, dropping my gaze and feeling like a child being scolded. Not that that stops my cock from stiffening, aching for more of Orion's harsh words.

He makes another half-amused, largely dismissive sound, crossing his arms and leaning against the sink.

"What are you even doing here? What the fuck do you want? Are you here to make sure I pay up? Is that it?" He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a roll of bills. "It's not like I've missed a payment yet, but sure, whatever. Fucking take it." He whips the roll at me, and it bounces off of the center of my chest. I catch it on the rebound, wrapping my fingers around it and licking my lips.

“Not my department.” I toss the money back to him. He doesn’t make a move to grab it though, letting it hit the ground near his feet without so much as blinking at it, his gaze still fixed on me.

Something hot dances behind his eyes. Rage and adrenaline, the kind of violence I would drown myself in if he let me.

“What then?” he demands through clenched teeth, blood still flowing freely from the wound on his face, trickling down onto the collar of his shirt and streaking across his throat. “Every time I turn around, you’re there. You’re the goddamn shadow I can’t stop seeing in the corner of my eye everywhere I go. What do you want from me?”

He pushes off the sink and steps into my space, bringing his face close to mine the same way he did last night, every exhaled breath bathing my face. My insides buzz and vibrate, heat churning in my gut as my cock pulses so hard it makes my knees tremble. My breaths come out in embarrassing little pants.

“ You ,” I answer.

ORION

I’m sure I heard him wrong. Or maybe I just don’t understand the meaning of the single, whispered word, even if it seems like it should be obvious.

You .

My nostrils flare, my pulse still beating at a frantic pace, the thrill of the fight pumping in my veins, leaving me drunk with unspent violence and frustration. And now he’s here, fucking with me, taunting me. Maybe this is some kind of homophobic bullshit. He heard I was gay and made it his pet cause to mess with my head, to throw me off balance and take the little bit of control I manage to cling to in

my life.

Or maybe it's worse than that. Maybe he thinks that since I owe his family money, he's entitled to whatever he wants from me. He thinks he can make me his powerless plaything and there's nothing I can do about it.

Does he think he's getting back at me for getting in his face last night?

A dark, humorless laugh rumbles in my throat and I take another step towards him, kicking the roll of bills out of the way in the process. Elio's throat bobs with a heavy swallow, but he holds his ground, his dark eyes burning into mine, his lips parted with heavy breaths. Whichever one of those possibilities is true, whatever his reason for fucking with me is, it's not going to go down the way he thinks it is. I can guarantee that much.

If he wants to play, I'll fucking play. But it's going to be on my terms, not his.

I dart a hand out and wrap it around his throat. There's a voice in the back of my head making a valiant attempt to save me from myself, trying to remind me that Elio can pull out his gun and shoot me if he wants to. He can make my life miserable in a million other ways too. Ways I'm sure I couldn't even fathom if I tried. But the feeling of his Adam's apple moving under my palm, the quiet, almost inaudible whimper that falls from his lips, the way his eyes widen with a hint of fear and arousal, all tap into the primal things inside of me that I struggle to control on my best days.

I tighten my grip and take another step towards him, shoving him backward until his back hits the wall. We're roughly the same height, but the way he shrinks under me makes it feel like I'm towering over him, overpowering him. His hands slide up my belly, bunching up my shirt as he drags his uncalled fingers over my skin. Elio's eyelashes flutter, his lids drooping, the hard, thick shape of his arousal jerking eagerly

against my thigh.

“You’re here because you want me ?” My voice is rough as gravel, my fingers flexing around his throat again, not pressing quite hard enough to cut off his air, but enough to let him know I could if I wanted to.

“Yes.” The word comes out as a hungry, gut-deep moan, stroking my cock to life and heating my skin from head to toe.

I’m still not sure what he’s playing at. Calling my bluff? Or maybe this unhinged Mafia prince gets off on being roughed up a little. Maybe he’s gotten tired of convincing the quivering yes-men in his life to push him around in bed and pretend to hate him, and now he wants the real thing. He wants to know what it’s like to be used and discarded by someone who actually fucking hates him.

“You’re a spoiled, pathetic brat,” I spit, bringing my face so close to his that our noses touch, the smell of his expensive cologne filling my lungs and lingering on my tongue.

Elio’s eyes roll back and his whole body convulses, trapped between me and the wall. He lets loose another one of those rattling moans, a sound that’s pure sex.

“Get on your knees.” I release my grip on his throat and take a step back so quickly that he stumbles, his eyes flying open as he sways forward, then immediately hits his knees right there on the filthy bathroom floor.

I look down at him, taking in the once-in-a-lifetime sight of a man like Elio Moretti kneeling in a suit that would pay for at least a month of Jack’s care. His face is flushed and his tie is loose, askew. His normally perfect hair is rumpled, and his chest is heaving with rapid, shallow breaths. He tilts his face up, meeting my gaze again with a desperate, almost helpless expression. Pleading written all over him.

I could walk away right now, leave him here on his knees, off balance and confused. The power in that is satisfying all on its own.

I reach down and palm my cock through my shorts, feeling the heat of my throbbing erection through two layers of clothing. It's been too damn long since I've seen any action that didn't come from my own right hand. Even longer since I've had a man willing to crawl for me. And the lingering adrenaline from the fight is making every twitch of his muscles, every bitten-off whimper he tries to swallow feel more intense, more exciting, more fucking necessary .

The fact that it's Elio fucking Moretti making my balls tighten and my heart thunder only pisses me off more. People like him think they own the rest of us. He struts around this city like it's his own little kingdom, waving his gun around wherever he pleases. Robbing people, killing people, taking anything he likes without a second thought about the consequences because he's never had any. What he needs is to learn a lesson. Forget teaching him manners. He needs to know that he doesn't own me.

I hook my fingers in the elastic waistband of my shorts and the jockstrap underneath, shoving them both down around my thighs. My cock springs free, bobbing in front of Elio's face, hard and thick, flushed with the blood that's pumping through it at the same frantic pace as my heartbeat. I tangle my fingers savagely in his hair, taking pleasure in messing it up even more, destroying the pristine image of him as a man with a five-hundred-dollar haircut. He can live in my world for a few minutes, hair wild and tangled.

I grip the base of my cock and press the tip against his soft, parted lips. He darts his tongue out, catching it on the loose, sensitive skin of my foreskin. I hiss, and a fat droplet of clear, slick precum oozes from my slit. Elio laps that up too, gasping quietly like he just fucking tasted his favorite dessert. I clench my jaw and tighten my fingers around my cock, making the tip swell even more.

“You’ve got everyone in this city on their knees for you. You want to see what it feels like when the tables turn? Well, here you fucking go,” I snarl, slamming my hips forward to force my cock between his lips.

His tongue vibrates against my shaft with a muffled groan. His eyes roll back again, and he balls his hands into fists on his lap, his erection visibly twitching through his expensive slacks. His lips stretch around the weighty girth of my cock as I bury myself deep. His throat convulses around me when I hit the fleshy back of it, making his entire body heave with a gag.

I choke back the moan that rises from my chest, refusing to give him the satisfaction. I pull back and snap my hips forward again, letting my head loll, biting down on my bottom lip as his throat gives way around me this time, engulfing me in tight, wet heat from root to tip. The ridges along the roof of his mouth drag along my shaft with each thrust, the eager, hungry stroke of his tongue bathing the underside and lapping at my head each time I pull out before fucking deep into his throat again.

I don’t give him the chance to catch his breath, falling into a brutal, greedy pace. Grunts rumble in my throat as I tug his hair harder, bleeding out all the aggression left over from the fight with each ruthless thrust. Tears stream from his eyes, staining his cheeks as he stares up at me with something that looks so much like fucking reverence that it makes me want to scream.

“You. Can’t. Fucking. Own. Me,” I rasp with each thrust. “But right now, I fucking own you .”

He makes a strangled, muffled sound around my cock, his body trembling and his cock flexing again. I slam my cock deep into his throat again and a guttural sound vibrates around me, Elio’s body shuddering with an unmistakable orgasm. I roar, twisting his hair, tugging it so hard I nearly tear chunks of it right out of his scalp as my balls pull up tight and my cock starts to pulse, painting the back of his throat with

rope after rope of my cum, choking him with it, drowning him in it.

Elio swallows every drop and laps at my slit for more when I start to pull out, sucking and whimpering like the pathetic cock slut he is. My head is spinning, my pulse thundering so loudly in my ears I can't hear anything else. His chest is rising and falling with the breaths he gulps down. I take him in again, his hair a disaster, his cheeks stained with tears, his pants wet with the orgasm that came from being hate fucked in the mouth on the floor of a public bathroom.

A hot, satisfied feeling courses through me.

I tuck my spent cock away and pull my shorts back into place before I stoop to pick up the roll of bills I threw at him earlier and stuff it into my pocket. Elio still hasn't gotten up. He hasn't said a word. The silence becomes a deafening white noise for another minute before I turn around and stride back over to the sink where he found me when he first came in.



### Chapter 5

#### ELIO

My knees ache against the hard tile floor as I gulp down breaths to slow my racing heart rate. I'm trying not to think too hard about when anyone might have bothered to mop this floor last, if ever, or the hot, sticky cum clinging to my soft cock and the inside of my underwear. Of course, the harder I try to think of anything else, the more stuck those two thoughts become, ricocheting around my brain and creating a hot well of shame in the pit of my stomach that I like a hell of a lot more than I should.

I drag my tongue slowly over my bottom lip, savoring the lingering flavor of Orion's cum—salty and sweet, and without a doubt my new favorite flavor in existence. My scalp is still tingling from the rough way he yanked at my hair, using me to work out his aggression, doing his level best to teach me some kind of lesson by punishing my throat with his cock. Unless the lesson was meant to be about what a shameless slut I am for pain and humiliation, I don't think I was a very good student. It would probably be best for us to have at least a dozen more one- on-one tutoring sessions just like this one until whatever it is he wants me to learn starts to sink in properly.

I study his back for a few seconds, lean but powerful as he hunches his shoulders slightly, his attention back on the bleeding wound on his jaw. Or maybe that's just a good excuse for him to ignore me until I take the hint and leave. Silent laughter tightens my throat, and I grin to myself. If he thinks being dismissive is all it's going to take to get me to slink away with my tail between my legs, then I'm not the only one with a lot to learn.

I get to my feet, careful not to touch the sticky floor with my hands as I push myself up. I don't bother to do anything to straighten myself out. My tie is crooked, my jacket unbuttoned, and even without looking in the mirror, I'm sure my hair is as wild as I feel inside right now. But I don't want to put myself back together yet. I want to wear the disarray and know that I didn't imagine the way he put his hands on me with the perfect blend of passion and violence.

Orion is dabbing at the jagged wound with a fresh wad of dry paper towels, his eyes flicking to mine through the mirror when I come up behind him for the second time tonight. This time, he doesn't bark anything at me. He doesn't scoff or scowl, he just glances at me for a second before yanking his attention away all over again.

The paper towel dispenser hanging next to the sink is barely attached to the wall at this point, hanging loosely and dented like it's seen one too many rogue fists from drunken patrons. But whoever is in charge of keeping it full didn't let that stop them from doing their job. The whole thing rattles and sways on the wall as I yank out a handful of brown paper towels.

Orion glances at me again as I sidle up next to him at the only working sink and crank the nozzle on. I stuff the wad of paper towels under the water, then wring them out so they aren't dripping wet.

"Here," I murmur, pivoting to face him.

He stares at me for a minute, his eyes ping ponging between the damp towels in my hand and my face, like he's trying to work out a complex puzzle. I'm expecting him to tell me to fuck off and stay away from him again, maybe even shove past me and leave without a word. But after a few silent moments, he lowers the bloodied compress away from his jaw and makes a grab for the ones in my hand. I yank them back, then take a step closer, feeling the heat radiating off of his body. The smell of his sweat and blood tickles my nose as I gently dab at the cut. The blood wells up and

spills over again every time I clear it.

Up close like this, I greedily rake my eyes over every inch of his face, cataloging all the details I've never had the time to notice before, like the hazel flecks in his green eyes and the light, almost invisible freckles on the bridge of his nose. His breathing is steady and even, his eyes hard as he stares right back at me like he's trying not to see me.

"It looks like you need stitches." I press and hold the paper towel to the spot again, applying more pressure this time.

"Mm," he grunts, a clear dismissal of my suggestion without uttering a single word.

"You don't have to tell them you got it during an illegal, underground fight." I pull the paper towels away to check it again. It takes a few seconds longer before the blood wells up again, but it still does. "Or I could come with you, keep them from questioning you about it at all."

Orion rumbles out another scathing, humorless laugh. "You've got ER doctors on the Moretti payroll, I take it?"

I flatten my lips into a thin line and reach for a fresh batch of towels. "One or two. And the rest of them know what's good for them, just like everyone else in this city. Except you, apparently."

He laughs again, but this time there actually is a hint of amusement in the sound, and it sets my heart racing all over again. He doesn't respond though, and I didn't really expect him to. He's obviously stubborn enough to avoid the hospital just because I told him he should go.

"Hold these." I press the fresh paper towels to his face and wait for him to take over

with his hand before pulling mine away. My unbuttoned suit jacket flutters open as I reach inside to check the hidden pockets. I notice Orion's eyes lingering on my holstered revolver, the furrow between his eyebrows deepening. My fingertips brush the small strips I was looking for. I pull out a small handful of butterfly sutures and button my jacket with one hand.

"You've got a pocketful of first aid supplies?" He surrenders the paper towels to me again, letting me pull them away from the wound and toss them into the trash.

Orion tilts his head slightly, giving me better access to patch him up.

"Believe it or not, they come in handy from time to time in my line of work," I say dryly. "They're not as good as the real thing, but they're better than nothing."

The stubble on his chin makes it harder to get the strips to stick, but it's not impossible. After I get the first couple applied, the bleeding finally stops, and the rest are a lot easier to place. There's already purple bruising and swelling forming around the cut.

"Why are you doing this?"

"Because you're too stubborn to go get proper stitches," I say with a pointed look.

"That's not what I meant," he mumbles, his face hardening again, his eyes searching mine like he's looking for answers to questions he hasn't bothered asking out loud. "I just damn near sexually assaulted you and you're playing doctor."

I snort a laugh. "If that had been sexual assault, I'd have shot you in the dick."

Orion winces. "Jesus."

I should quit while I'm ahead. He already thinks I'm a heartless monster, willing to shoot a waitress in cold blood if she gets my order wrong. But there's some sick need inside of me that keeps my mouth moving, some fucked-up voice in my head that wants to know just how much I can make him hate me.

"It wouldn't have been the first time, and I promise you, I would have gone home and slept like a baby while you spent the night bleeding out here on the bathroom floor."

Right on cue, coldness flickers in Orion's eyes and he jerks away from my touch. Satisfaction and disgust with myself war inside of me.

"Playing god is just a day in the life of a Moretti, isn't it?"

"Sometimes," I admit, leaning in closer again to reclaim the space. He doesn't move, doesn't shove me away or tell me to back the fuck off as I ghost the tip of my nose along the uninjured side of his jaw, then up to his cheek, where I press my lips against his skin. Orion shudders and tenses, but still doesn't make a sound. "Thanks for tonight. I'll see you around."

Everything inside of me wants to drag him back home with me. I want to spend the rest of the night finding different ways to press his buttons to see just how brightly I can make his eyes burn with rage. I want to let him hate me until I'm immune to the sting of it.

But I'm smart enough to know when I've pushed my luck enough for one night. I can feel his eyes on my back as I leave the bathroom. I stride through the raucous crowd again, passing the bar without stopping to so much as glance at the bottles lined up along the back wall, up the stairs, and out into the alley. I'm vaguely aware that my hair and clothes are still a mess, completely at odds with the dangerous, organized man I walked in here as tonight.

Orion took me apart, and I think he's the only one who can put me back together.

## ORION

I glare at the door and finish cleaning the streaks of blood off my skin as best I can. My balls are still fucking tingling from how hard I came in Elio's mouth. His handy little butterfly sutures solved the problem of the bleeding, and then he had to go and drop some psycho shit like that before leaving. As if he was the one who used me and just got to walk away.

What the fuck is wrong with him?

And why the hell do I want to follow him out of here just to yell at him some more about fucking with my head? Every time I see him, I tell him to leave me the fuck alone. Now, when he actually walks away, I want to chase him?

I get rid of the last of the paper towels and force myself to wait a few minutes, so I won't feel like I'm going after him. I shove my hands into my pockets when I finally slip out of the bathroom, checking that my money is still there. Not that I think he could have pickpocketed me. Well, maybe he could have. What the fuck do I know about the things a Moretti is capable of? Even if he had, it wouldn't have mattered. This money is going right in his till anyway.

The humid air of the bar gives way to a cool breeze when I step out into the alley. Gravel crunches under my feet, drowned out after a few seconds by the familiar sounds of the city. Traffic, voices, music. It's a lively, comforting sound that never fails to make me feel at home, and yet somehow completely alienated at the same time.

I pass by the assisted living facility without stopping tonight. I can't go in there with blood crusted on my shirt and a fresh cut on my face. Jack will want to know what

happened, and I'm too tired to come up with a plausible lie.

I pick up my pace until I'm practically jogging, trying not to imagine the disappointed look on my brother's face if he knew about all the shit I've had to do to keep up with the cost of his care. Underground fights, borrowing money from the Morettis...

He has enough to worry about without having to stress about all that bullshit.

I reach my building and stop to fish my keys out of my pocket. I jog up the few steps to the main door and mutter a curse under my breath when I see it's propped open. It's like people want to get robbed. I kick the doorstep out of the way and let the heavy door swing closed behind me.

The yellowing walls of the entryway smell like decades-old cigarette smoke and the remnants of a million dinners that have wafted through the hallway over the years. The linoleum floor is peeling, and I notice some black specks in one corner that are more than likely rat droppings.

Home sweet home.

I turn towards the stairs, but movement catches the corner of my eye. There's a quiet mrrrow and an undersized gray tabby cat scampers out from the storage space under the steps.

"Come here, you little troublemaker." I stoop down and drum my fingers on the floor to entice the cat towards me. "You know, if you're going to spend so much time roaming these halls, you could at least try to eat some of the rodents."

He meows again, and butts his forehead against my knee, purring when I put my hand under his chest and scoop him up. He digs his claws into my shirt, the fabric making

little tearing sounds as he kneads it and purrs even harder on our way upstairs. He sniffs at the blood on my shirt and makes an offended face at me that draws a chuckle from my throat.

“Sorry, dude. I don’t like it that much either.”

I stop at the second door on the floor and angle myself so I won’t scare Mrs. Stevens with the sight of my mangled face and the drying blood on my clothes. I rap my knuckles against the door, noticing the tender ache in them from fighting bare knuckled tonight. Well, not quite bare, but the wrap I put around them only saved them from getting scraped up during the fight, it didn’t cushion any of the blows.

I hear the shuffle of footsteps on the other side of the door, and the cat starts to squirm in my arms. Another few seconds and it finally swings open. Mrs. Stevens is wearing a fluffy bathrobe and a pair of house shoes that she’s probably owned since the war. She’s already taken her teeth out for the night, so the big grin she gives me is mildly unsettling, but I smile back anyway.

“Sorry to disturb you so late, but I found Gato prowling around downstairs. Someone left the door propped open, so I’m glad he didn’t make a run for it.” I let the cat leap out of my arms and flounce into the apartment.

“Oh my. I didn’t even realize he was missing. Thank you so much. You’re such a good boy.” She says the same thing every time I bring Gato back for her, and every time I nod and smile, not inclined to ruin her image of me as her heroic, cat rescuing neighbor by telling her I stopped being a boy a hell of a long time ago, and that most days, I’m not sure I’m all that good. “Let me make you some tea,” she offers.

“Thanks, but I actually need to turn in. How about tomorrow instead?” I suggest. Gato weaves between her legs and tries to dart out into the hallway again, but I stop him with a gentle nudge of my foot.



“That sounds lovely. Stop by any time.”

“Thanks, I will. Good night.” I breathe a sigh of relief when she closes the door without noticing my injury.

I continue on down the hallway until I reach the last door. The deadbolts groan as I stick my key in each lock to undo them. The door jams, and I wince as I put my shoulder into it to force it open. As soon as I step inside, I redo all the locks. There isn't a hell of a lot in my apartment that anyone would want to steal, but the wad of cash in my pocket is certainly incentive enough. Of course, anyone who was at the fight and knows I walked away with the money probably isn't stupid enough to come take it from me, but you never know.

The white noise of the traffic outside is faint, creating a soothing harmony with the hum of the old refrigerator in my kitchen and the muffled sound of a tv show I can hear through the walls. My ears are still ringing from the fight, from the noise of the bar, and, if I'm being honest with myself, from Elio's parting words.

Thanks for tonight. I'll see you around.

Were they meant to be dismissive? Were they a promise? A threat? I don't have the first fucking clue. I shuffle through my apartment to the small bedroom, barely big enough to fit my queen bed and a dresser. I strip off my shirt, the fabric stiff with dried blood, and toss it into the pile of dirty clothes that I need to find time to haul down to the laundry room.

I collapse on the edge of the bed, the frame creaking under my weight. The ache in my jaw is already boring, barely noticeable, but I probe it with my fingers anyway. The memory of Elio's dark eyes drilling into me makes my jaw tick and my insides burn.

If that had been sexual assault, I'd have shot you in the dick.

I sputter a laugh in spite of myself, remembering the twitch of his lips when he said it. Jesus, he really is fucking cold blooded. Or maybe it's just an act—a survival tactic like the ones I've had to learn. I bristle at the momentary softness I feel towards the stone-cold killer. You don't get to be the underboss of a crime family like the Morettis without being a seriously fucked-up person. Elio doesn't deserve my sympathy. What he deserves is to get roughed up again, to be forced to his knees a second time and put in his place. He deserves to be spanked until his ass is bright red with my handprints and that cocky fucking attitude of his is forgotten.

I grind my teeth harder and scoff out loud to my empty apartment.

Forget what he needs.

What I need is to stay as far away from that mess as possible. I need to pay off my debt, then figure out a way to get enough money together so I won't have to keep risking my life in underground fights. One problem at a time, I suppose. But none of it will be solved by getting mixed up with Elio Moretti. Period.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:17 pm*

### Chapter 6

#### ELIO

The paper bag crinkles under my arm, the sound somehow managing to be louder than the rumble of traffic from the street and the deafening hum of pedestrians moving around me on the sidewalk. Maybe because I can't stop picturing the hard scowl Orion is bound to wear when he finds out what I've done.

Not that it stops me or even slows me down. If anything, I pick up my pace as I near Lorenzo's building. The towering glass building stands out, even on a street lined with luxury penthouses and high-end hotels. There's not one, but two doormen who man the lobby. One to open the door with a friendly smile, doing his best to hide the flicker of nerves in his eyes when he sees me. And the other to greet me once I step inside.

"Mr. Moretti, it's nice to see you this afternoon," Carlisle, the older of the two men, has been the full-time doorman here since Enzo bought the top floor penthouse a handful of years ago. "Is Mr. Moretti expecting you?"

My lips twitch into a resigned half smile. Wouldn't it be simpler and less confusing to dispense with the formalities and just use our first names? God forbid anyone might call me Elio, even if I've requested it on a thousand different occasions.

"I didn't call ahead," I say. Honestly, I didn't even think about what I was doing or where I was going until I was halfway here, weaving through traffic in my Jag, with a paper bag filled with twenty thousand dollars sitting on my passenger seat.

Carlisle picks up the phone on his desk to make a call to Enzo. While I wait, my mind wanders back to the years when Lorenzo and I shared an apartment after college. Not because we couldn't afford our own places—we were both working for the family at that point and pulling in plenty of money—but I guess out of some sense of brotherly bonding. Growing up the way we did, nothing ever felt stable. You could be talking to Uncle Georgio one morning, and by the afternoon he could be dead or behind bars. Shit like that always happened fast. Living with Enzo felt like being in a bubble away from that for a little while though. At least until our dad died.

“I appreciate your patience, sir,” Carlisle says once he hangs up the phone. “Mr. Moretti says you can go up.”

“Thank you.” I give a nod of thanks and step around his desk, into the waiting elevator behind it.

I fidget with my tie with my free hand as I watch the numbers over the elevator door increase one at a time, so slowly I wonder if I could have walked up the fifteen flights of stairs faster than this. Then again, it's not like I'm in a hurry. The sooner I get to Enzo's door, the sooner I have to explain why the hell I'm paying off Orion's debt. I should have taken the cash to Sal. This is his department anyway. But the only thing worse than having to look my brother in the face and bullshit him about this money would be Salvatore letting it slip at some point that I was the one to pay off Orion's debt. Then it would look like I purposefully went behind Enzo's back with the whole thing.

Family politics. I'm guessing we're not all that different from most families, with everyone sticking their noses into each other's personal lives, getting pissy when they feel like they've been left out of the loop... Same old, same old. Except maybe for the fact that we're all heavily armed. It's been years since a family conflict ended with anyone being shot though.

The doors slide open on Enzo's floor, and I tighten my arm around the bag as I step off the elevator. His door is the only one in the small hallway, my footsteps echoing off the marble floor for the few steps it takes to reach it. The heavy black door swings open before I can knock, and my brother fills the doorway, immediately looking me up and down with concern.

Instead of his typical expensive suit, he's dressed comfortably in a pair of loose-fitting black sweatpants and a light blue t-shirt that softens him, despite the fire in his eyes and the worry line etched between his eyebrows.

I roll my eyes and shoulder past him into his apartment. "Unbunch your panties. No one is dead and I'm perfectly sober."

Come to think of it, I haven't touched a drink in over a week. Not since the night I got drunk after Orion's last fight... Well, his last legal fight, anyway. I've been too busy being strung out on memories of the way he ordered me to my knees and fucked my mouth like he wanted to punish me. I jerked off to the memory of it three times a day until my dick was raw and my balls were sore.

He scoffs and swings the door closed behind me.

"Excellent news. It's so rare that anyone bothers to come by without an ulterior motive. Broken noses to fix, problems to solve, dead bodies that need to be dealt with. It's always something. But I knew I could count on my baby brother to stop by simply because he misses me and is ready to take me up on that offer for an afternoon of ordering takeout and watching movies." Let it never be said that Lorenzo Moretti doesn't know exactly how to twist the knife.

I wince at his casual, knowing tone, calling me out without uttering a single accusation.

“We can watch movies and order food.” It wasn’t part of the plan, but I don’t have anything else going on this afternoon, so why the hell not. “But, uh…”

He stands casually with his hands in the pockets of his sweatpants, his shoulders relaxed in a way I rarely see since he took over the Family. I pull the bag of cash out from under my arm and hold it out to him. He arches an eyebrow.

“What’s this?” he asks, not making a move to grab it.

“The balance of Orion Barros’s debt,” I answer, and a second eyebrow joins the first, inching up his forehead as he studies me with probing eyes.

“You doing collections these days? Got bored of delegating that task to your underlings and decided to shake down a couple of guys yourself?” He cocks his head to one side and his lips curl into a smirk. “Or is it just the beautifully savage MMA fighters who require your personal attention?”

My throat tightens and the paper crinkles noisily under my fingers, giving away the twitch of my grasp. Of course he’s seen right through me. Lorenzo is no idiot, and I haven’t exactly been subtle about my interest. But for some reason, I can’t make myself admit that he’s right.

“It’s money,” I say gruffly, stepping closer and shoving the bag into his chest. “Can you just take it without giving me the third degree about it?”

His eyes tighten and darken for a fraction of a second before he finally pulls one hand out of his pocket and takes the money from me. He doesn’t open the bag to check any of it, he just moves past me, striding into the large main room of his penthouse and tossing the money carelessly onto the coffee table. The bag slides across the glass tabletop, stopping just before it topples over the edge. Meanwhile, Lorenzo makes himself comfortable on the leather couch in the middle of the room, crossing his

ankle over his knee and stretching one arm along the back of the couch.

He picks up his phone, and I realize I'm still rooted to the spot. I shrug out of my suit jacket and unstrap my leather holster, then slip my shoes off. I stretch my toes inside my socks and reach up to loosen my tie before following him into the living room. He glances up from his phone and does a quick once-over of my more relaxed appearance, grunting what sounds like approval.

"Pad Lao and spicy wontons?" he guesses, and I nod.

"Hell yeah," I agree, my mouth already watering. I take a seat on the other end of the couch, mirroring his position and reaching for the remote so I can find something to watch. If I'm not quick, we'll end up watching the entire Godfather trilogy.

I settle on Scarface while he finishes placing our order and lets Carlisle know that we have food coming. Then, he slips his phone into his pocket, cracks his neck, and swivels to face me a little more.

"You realize I don't give a damn who you fuck, right?" His voice is rough, but there's a layer of something gentler underneath, like he's worried that I'm actually lying awake at night, afraid he won't approve of my love life.

I snort and grin. No, I'm definitely not stressed that Lorenzo or anyone else who matters will have an issue with my crush on Orion. Crush. The word is entirely too tame. Obsession, perhaps? I roll the word around on my tongue without saying it out loud.

"You want a full accounting of everyone I get off with?" I ask blandly. "Do fantasies count, or are you only interested in who I actually close the deal with?"

"Why don't we just keep it to men who are important enough to warrant paying off

their debts.” He matches my tone.

“He’s been doing underground fights twice a week to earn the money to pay that debt off.” It’s a true statement, I’m just leaving off the part where I decided to take care of the rest of it myself without telling him.

Enzo hums in response.

“Who are you dating these days?” I turn the line of questioning back on him.

“I’m spoiled for choice, aren’t I? Between the men who are looking for nothing more than money and status, and the ones who are too damn scared of me to be any fun,” he mutters. “And, of course, I have the added privilege of paranoia, always wondering if any man who throws me a flirtatious smile could be an undercover Fed or a hitman sent by another Family, desperate to encroach on our territory.”

The irritation that was simmering in my chest moments ago fizzles out in an instant.

“That makes two of us.” I sigh.

His lips twist into a sympathetic smile and he pushes himself up off the couch. He crosses the room to the bar cart in the corner and pours two glasses from the crystal decanter our dad always kept his favorite Scotch in. When he returns to the couch, he hands me one of the glasses, and holds his up.

“To mob life,” he laments, and I clink my rim against his.

“You said it,” I murmur before taking a sip.

ORION



I get out of my car in the well-lit parking lot of Wild, two rolls of bills clenched tightly in one fist, the crumpled remains of a letter from Jack's insurance company clutched in the other. Apparently, they need proof of his ongoing disability if we want them to keep paying for the portion of his care they've been covering. The original letter from his physician stating he'd never so much as twitch a pinky again wasn't enough for a bunch of suits with no medical training, I guess. But until I produce more proof, they're not paying.

I ball it up with a frustrated growl vibrating in my throat, and I whip it at the ground before slamming my car door behind me. One more fucking problem I have to deal with. If I didn't have to hand over this week's payment to the Morettis, I could use it to cover more of Jack's expenses. But I took out the loan, and I'm going to pay it back. Besides, something tells me the care home's late payment policy is a lot more forgiving and less painful than the Mafia's.

I make my way through the parking lot, pausing at the door to pay the ten-dollar fucking cover charge to get inside the club. Figure that one the fuck out. I grind my teeth together, grunting impatiently at the bouncer when he finally waves me inside. I realize I'm in a shitty mood tonight, but I'd also love to know whose classy fucking idea it was for the Morettis to set up shop in a strip club.

I scowl at the scantily clad men who attempt to approach me to offer a lap dance or a drink. I don't have the patience for any of this shit tonight. I just want to make my payment and then maybe go find a way to blow off some of this steam. It pisses me off to no end that the first thing that comes to mind is an image of Elio on his knees for me.

I bite the inside of my cheek until I taste blood.

Going to find Elio is definitely not the way I'm going to exorcise my rage. Maybe I'll make a few calls and see if there are any underground fights I can get in on. Or

maybe I'll swing by the gym and beat the hell out of a punching bag for an hour or so. Irritation bristles along the back of my neck though, neither of those options doing anything to satisfy the gnawing feeling in my gut.

I approach the table where Salvatore Moretti is seated by himself, his eyes fixed on the dancer up on stage—a petite, tan man wearing nothing but a G-string. In hindsight, the assumption that Elio was mocking me for being gay the other night was probably bordering on paranoia. The stereotype of old school mobsters putting a bullet between the eyes of any queers they find among their ranks clearly doesn't apply to the Morettis.

Salvatore doesn't even seem to notice me approaching the table, completely mesmerized by the way the dancer hangs upside down from the pole. I clear my throat and he bares his teeth in irritation at the interruption. He fixes the lapels on his burgundy suit, then looks me up and down slowly.

"Nice fight last week," he says after a few seconds.

I jerk my chin in a nod. "Thanks." The single word sounds harsh to my own ears, and I'm well aware that I need to rein in my attitude before I end up pissing off a mobster who isn't likely to be so eager to choke on my cock.

My dick jerks at the flippant thought and the memory of Elio's hot, wet mouth around me. Jesus, I really do need to fucking hit something tonight.

I set the two heavy rolls of cash down on the table in front of him and cross my arms.

"I should be halfway to paid off with these," I say gruffly, knowing he's going to count them and check his spreadsheet either way.

He does the latter first, picking up the sleek, expensive looking tablet in front of him

and tapping at the screen to bring up his spreadsheet. I shift my weight impatiently from one foot to the other, antsy as fuck to get the hell out of this club and away from Salvatore, or anyone else with the last name Moretti.

After a minute, he sets the tablet down again and nudges both rolls of money back in my direction.

“Your balance is zeroed out.”

I frown. “What?”

“You don’t owe us anything,” he says, and I swear my brain makes a grinding noise like a fork stuck in a garbage disposal.

“What?” I ask again, sure I heard him wrong. Or maybe this is some kind of test. Do mobsters do that shit? Would he pretend I don’t owe anything just so they can tell me I’m behind later and break my knees? Or worse, force me to do the one thing I swore I’d never do—lose a fight on purpose.

“Your. Debt. Is. Paid. Off.” Salvatore enunciates each word slowly, like I’m some kind of moron.

I ball my fists and glare at the rolls of cash on the table. “That’s impossible. Check it again.”

Both his eyebrows jump up and he sits up a little straighter. “You think I don’t know how to keep my own damn books?”

My heart jumps into my throat and I take a step back, holding both hands up defensively on instinct. “No.” I glance at the money again, and then back to him. “I just... I don’t understand how it got paid off. I know what I owed, and I know I didn’t

pay it.”

There’s a small voice in the back of my head telling me to shut the hell up, to shove the money into my pocket and get the hell out of here before he decides to keep it as a convenience fee, or whatever the fuck else he might want to call it.

He shrugs and turns his attention back to the dancer. “Somebody did.”

“But who...” I trail off, the answer forming in my mind with complete certainty. I slam my teeth together hard enough to rattle them, snatching the money off the table. “Thanks,” I mutter, seething as I stuff the cash into my pocket and turn on my heel to leave.

I need to figure out where Elio fucking Moretti lives.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:17 pm*

### Chapter 7

ELIO

I wrap my fingers around the familiar handle of the nine-millimeter I keep on my nightstand, the action so automatic that it doesn't matter that I'm not really awake yet. I'm still lost in a dream about being put over Orion's knee and spanked that was so vivid I swear my ass cheeks are tingling with the phantom shape of his hand. My cock is rock hard, my vision bleary as I blink into the darkness of my bedroom, silky bedsheets tangled around my legs and I try to figure out what woke me.

Thud, thud, thud .

The thunderous pounding at my front door answers the question for me, jolting me out of bed, my heart racing for only a second before a steely sort of calm washes over me. Chances are good that it's one of my soldiers at the door, possibly one of the more stupid capos with the idiotic idea to show up at my door in the middle of the night, banging down my door like the fucking Vandals at the gates of Rome.

I can't imagine an assassin or one of Fitzpatrick's men announcing themselves like this before an attempt on my life. But anything's possible, which is why I cock my gun as I move silently through my dark apartment, my bare feet not making a single sound on the cool floor. My breathing is steady, my heart beating out an even rhythm as more rapid, urgent pounding rattles my eardrums the closer I get to the door.

This is why Lorenzo chose a building with two doormen. I opted for a place with more lax security in exchange for private rooftop access so I could plant a vegetable

garden. I always feel smug about the decision when I'm enjoying juicy heirloom tomatoes fresh off the vine, but right now I'm willing to admit that my brother may have made the wiser choice. Not that I'd ever tell him that.

Thud, thud, thud, thud .

“Open the goddamn door, Elio.”

A hot shiver runs down my spine, melting my icy composure in an instant. The hair on my arms and the back of my neck stands on end, and my breath hitches. I lower my gun, making an automatic move to tuck it into my holster before realizing that not only am I not wearing one, I'm not wearing much of anything.

I turn the lock and pull the door open just an inch, leaning against the doorframe and peeking out through the crack, a slow, lazy smirk spreading over my lips as I take in the stuff wet dreams are made of. Orion is standing in my hallway, his chest heaving with ragged breaths, his face twisted with the kind of rage that might make a lesser man quake. Of course, it has the opposite effect on me. The soft cotton of my briefs pulls taut over the rapid swell of my cock.

“Or what? You'll huff, and you'll puff, and you'll blow it down?” I taunt.

A muscle in his jaw twitches, and my eyes wander to the healing cut, the butterfly sutures still in place. The memory of his fingers tugging at my hair and his cock pummeling my throat makes my mouth water and my nipples tighten, my whole body vibrating with the urge to throw myself at him. Have I lost any ounce of dignity I've ever had when it comes to Orion? Absolutely. Do I care? Not even a little.

He puts a hand on the door and shoves it, hard, knocking me off balance just long enough to give him the chance to force his way inside. By any definition this is a home invasion, and if the look on his face is anything to go by, he's here to kill me.

It's a new level of fucked up that my dick twitches and I nearly pant at the thought. I'd rather die with Orion's hands around my throat than have anyone else touch me at all.

As if he can read my thoughts, he uses one hand to swing the door closed behind him while he wraps the other around my throat and backs me up against the nearest wall. An accent table covered with priceless knick-knacks rattles next to me. For all the rage etched deeply into the lines of his face, his grip isn't even hard enough to bruise—just enough to hold me in place. I dart my tongue out to wet my lips, letting him force me to my tip toes as he moves in close, bringing us chest to chest, nose to nose, my throbbing cock pressed right up against the unmistakable bulge in his jeans.

He might be pissed, but he's getting off on this just as much as I am. Whether he wants to admit it to himself or not.

He bares his teeth in a feral snarl, his long hair hanging in loose, wild waves around his face.

“Why'd you do it?” The question is quiet, but dripping with menace. I'm not sure if I should blame lingering sleep fog or the fact that my dick refuses to share any of the blood flow with my brain right now for the fact that I don't have the first clue what he's talking about. He doesn't wait for me to figure it out on my own though. “You think by paying off my debt you fucking own me? You wanted something to hang over my head? What?”

I don't have a good answer. At least not one he's likely to accept.

“How did you find out where I live?” I ask instead.

His fingers flex around my throat and the snarl curls into a dangerous smirk. “It wasn't hard to figure out which side of town I'd find you on. You'd be surprised how

many people in this neighborhood were more than happy to sell you out with the smallest amount of prompting.”

“Prompting?” I repeat with a chuckle. “Don’t tell me you did something as immoral as threatening someone.” I click my tongue in disapproval, barely managing to hold back the moan that swells in my chest at his answering growl of frustration, his body pressing harder against mine.

“I didn’t wave a fucking gun around,” he hisses.

The comment reminds me that mine is still clutched tightly in my hand.

“This is the reason you hate me?” I drag the barrel of the pistol along his hip. “Take it, then. I don’t need it.”

Orion scoffs, his eyes darkening as they bore into mine.

“I hate you because you lord over this city like a self-appointed monarchy. Your family lives with their hands around the throats of the rest of us, lining your pockets with our money and washing our blood off your shoes like it means nothing to any of you.” His words are more effective than any physical blow could ever be, rocking me and stunning me to silence. But he’s not done. “But the worst thing about you, Elio, is that you think you can have anything you want. You’re spoiled. You think you can walk into my life and start taking care of my problems like you’re my fucking daddy. I didn’t need a daddy when I was a kid, and I sure as fuck don’t need one now.” His nostrils flare and his hot breath fans over my lips, his eyes burning with an intensity that makes my heart flail and my body ache for him. “I have half a mind to pull your underwear down and beat your ass until you get it through your head that you can’t have every fucking thing you want.”

I can’t? That’s funny, because the only thing I want right now is exactly what he just



threatened me with. I want it more than my next breath.

“Please,” I rasp, rocking my hips to drag my throbbing cock against him, my eyelids fluttering when he tightens his grip around my throat again, finally hard enough that I can feel the faint ache of bruises forming.

“You’re kind of fucked in the head, aren’t you?” Orion murmurs.

I can’t tell if it’s a compliment or an insult, but I nod regardless.

ORION

I didn’t spend half the night scouring bars all over the North side of Wildcliff for anyone who could tell me where Elio lived so I could come here and play sex games with him. But somehow, that’s exactly what seems to be happening.

He stumbles down the hallway with my hand still around his throat, barely enough light coming through the windows for me to see where I’m going. The squeak of my shoes on his polished wood floors is unnaturally loud in my ears, giving me an odd sense of satisfaction. I hope I’m leaving scuffs that he’ll have to get on his hands and knees to buff out later. I want to leave marks on the pristine facade of his life the same way I’m about to leave my handprints all over his bare ass.

My cock jerks and throbs, achingly hard inside my jeans as I find the living room and push Elio towards the couch.

“Lose the gun. Unless you’re actually planning to shoot me in the dick,” I bark.

He lets out a rough chuckle, his voice sounding raw and constricted even after I unwrap my fingers from around his throat.

“Yes, Boss.” The obedient words tumble so beautifully from his lips that they knock me off balance for half a second before filling me with a deep sense of satisfaction.

This night is getting away from me quickly, leaving me clawing for any bit of control I can get my hands on, and hearing the word ‘Boss’ on Elio’s tongue is scratching an itch that’s been neglected for too damn long. When everything else in my life feels like it’s spiraling and chaotic, sex has always been the one area where I have some sense of power. But ever since Jack’s injury, I haven’t had the time or energy to find anyone to play with. Not like this. And now here’s Elio, the bratty Mafia prince himself, eager to splay himself over my lap and offer his ass up to me, like he needs this as badly as I do.

He sets his pistol on the coffee table while I sit down on the deep leather couch. It’s not the kind of cheap leather that sticks to your bare skin and feels like it’s half plastic. No, it’s smooth as butter. It even smells expensive, like whoever delivered it wore a hazmat suit just to avoid the audacity of leaving a hair or an oily fingerprint anywhere on it.

My couch is held up by milk crates. Jack and I pulled it out of the trash ten years ago, laughing about it at the time and vowing that we’d get a new one as soon as the paychecks started rolling in. I grit my teeth at the injustice of it. The unfairness of the fact that Jack is stuck in that fucking bed relying on me to take care of him, and I can barely even do that. The absurdity of everything Elio has. The logical side of my brain knows that one has nothing to do with the other, but it’s something for me to latch onto right now.

I grit my teeth and snag Elio around the waist with one arm, using my free hand to yank his underwear down roughly at the same time. His ass cheeks jiggle and his cock springs free as I shove his briefs down around his thighs. He gasps, the sound half excitement, half fear, but entirely horny.

His round, perky ass cheek is right in front of my face, tan and flawless, without a mark on it. I lean forward and sink my teeth into it, biting down until he yelps and his cock jerks, a dribble of precum glistening in the light coming in through the floor-to-ceiling windows.

“We’re not doing safewords. Cry or scream if you want, but if you say ‘stop,’ it’s over. So if you don’t want me to stop, you’d better bite your fucking tongue. Got it?” I rumble, and he bobs his head in agreement, swaying on his feet.

I tug him down and he stumbles, then falls across my lap, splayed out on the couch with his ass in the air, his hard cock pressed against my denim-clad thighs. I drag my eyes over the long, lean lines of his body, his smooth, unblemished skin. He lets out a rattling breath, his shoulders relaxing and his body sagging across my lap like he doesn’t want to be anywhere else in the world. Like he trusts me.

The hot, boiling hate churning in my gut turns into something else for a minute, something deeper and more primal. I raise my hand high and bring it down hard against his ass cheek with a resounding thwack that echoes through the room and vibrates in my palm. Elio yelps, just like he did before, clenching his cheeks tightly, then relaxing again and pushing his hips into the air to wordlessly beg for another one.

I do it again, landing the next blow right over the spot where I bit him, hoping he’ll have a bruise in the shape of my teeth tomorrow morning. If he was trying to buy me by paying off my debt, he’ll see the mark and know his plan backfired. He’s not going to put a collar around my neck and lead me around on a diamond-studded leash. Although, I have to admit, the idea has its merits if I imagine Elio as the one collared.

Thwack, thwack, thwack . My hand cracks against his ass over and over, warming his skin, drawing muffled whimpers from him with every fresh slap. His cheeks ripple

and his back hitches with every trembling breath he drags in. He digs his fingers into the smooth leather of the couch and arches into every blow I deliver.

The rage that was coiled tightly in my chest when I came pounding at his door is already twisting and contorting inside of me, turning into something different, something I don't want but can't stop.

When I'm in the ring, every hit I deliver only winds my insides tighter. There's no release, no relief, just mounting violence and adrenaline with nowhere to go. This is the exact opposite. I swing my hand down to connect with the back of Elio's thigh and the fury inside me bleeds out little by little, helped along by the soft mewling sounds the supposedly dangerous gangster is making as he rocks his hips to grind his cock against my thighs.

I hate him , I remind myself, peppering a series of rapid-fire slaps across the upper swell of his ass, heating the spots I missed before, covering every inch of his backside with stinging handprints. My cock pulses and drools precum, leaving the inside of my boxers sticky while my heart thunders in my ears. But no matter how loud my pulse is, it's not enough to drown out the needy sounds that continue to fall from Elio's lips.

"Please," he pants, squirming and humping my thigh. "I'll be good, Boss."

The promise I didn't ask for tears at something deep inside of me, winding me up, making me want to bite him again, to spank him harder, to do anything I can to make him say it again, while simultaneously wanting to shove something into his mouth so he can't utter another word.

Elio's reddened ass flexes, his muscles clenching as he thrusts faster, shamelessly grinding his cock into my thighs as he claws at the sofa. His toes curl and scramble for purchase and his precum soaks through the denim of my jeans to dampen my skin.

I grab his ass cheek harshly, digging my fingers into his abused flesh to part his cheeks. He hisses and moans, trying to hold himself still but failing after only a second and returning to his wild, unrestrained humping.

I slap two fingers over his quivering hole with the same force as the other spans I've delivered, and he wails. I can see his balls tightening, feel the stiffness of his cock as he fucks my lap. All the thoughts I had of wanting to cause him pain are muddled now with the inescapable need to make him come. Like if I don't, I might actually die.

I squeeze his ass cheek again, dragging my fingers down his crease until I reach his balls. I wrap my fingers around them and give a rough tug, and Elio convulses, moaning from deep in his gut and bucking against my lap like an animal in heat. A sob tears from his throat and his cock starts to pulse, his balls twitching in my grip as his release soaks through my jeans.

Heat licks at my skin, the urges to kiss him and bite him warring with each other as I use my free hand to land a few more sound smacks against his cheeks, his orgasm going on and on, making him tense and twitch and moan over my lap until he finally collapses, boneless.

I grunt and dump him onto the couch, freeing myself from underneath him. He barely moves, just flops down like a rag doll as I work my pants open and kneel over him. I put one hand on the middle of his back to pin him down, even though he's showing no signs of wanting to get away. I doubt he would even if he had the energy to after an orgasm like that.

I wrap my hand around my shaft and lean down to bite the back of his shoulder, sinking my teeth in and then dragging my tongue over the tender spot. I work my hand over my length frantically and bite him again, leaving marks across the expanse between his shoulder blades and the back of his neck. I can taste the sweat on his

skin, but it's overpowered by the flavor of expensive soap—something woodsy, even though I doubt he ever bothers to leave the city. I cling to that petty irritation as hard as I can, pressing the tip of my cock to his heated ass cheeks, rubbing my slick head over the crease without bringing it anywhere near the temptation of his hole.

He arches into me again, and I clench my teeth around a groan as my balls pull tight and my cock starts to pulse. The last dregs of the rage that drew me here tonight are wrung out as I shout my orgasm, my hand flying over my cock at a brutal pace, rope after rope of my cum splattering over Elio's abused ass cheeks, my face pressed into the back of his neck.

I grind against him until my balls are drained. My knees quake and the cum-drunk idea to collapse on top of him, to cuddle him, nearly overtakes me. But I climb off of him before I can do anything that stupid. Elio doesn't move except to turn his head as I tuck my cock away and zip my cum-stained jeans.

It's too dark to tell, but it looks like there might be tear stains on his cheek. The whoosh of blood in my ears is a white noise that feels like a stark contrast to the intensity of what just happened between us. Like stepping outside into a silent night after a concert, leaving your ears ringing and your chest feeling empty.

“That guy you shot in the dick... did he touch you?” The words are out of my mouth without any conscious decision to ask the question, my voice harsh and breathless. I'm not sure why I care, or if the story is even true.

He lets out a dark chuckle. “He tried.”

Elio's the last person who needs my concern or protection, and I don't really want to give it to him, but that doesn't stop the tight swell of anger from bubbling up inside of me.

“And he’s dead now?” I ask.

“Yup.” Just a single word. Succinct without a hint of remorse. I should add it to the long list of proof that Elio and everyone like him is a monster to be avoided at all costs. Instead, I nod with satisfaction.

“Good.”

He watches me silently and I stare right back, mentally grasping for the fleeting wisps of control that are already out of my reach again. When I can’t stare back at him any longer, I reach into my pocket and hold up the roll of cash, making sure he sees it before I set it down on the table next to his gun.

“I pay my own debts.”

I’m expecting him to argue, and for a second it looks like he’s going to, but then he just nods.

I leave without another word, and on the elevator ride back down to the lobby, I try to figure out how exactly things went so far off the rails tonight. Elio’s like a drug, getting into my veins and making me do things I know I shouldn’t. And just like a drug, I’m cursing him and wondering when I can get my next hit before my feet even touch pavement again.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:17 pm*

### Chapter 8

#### ELIO

It's been three days since Orion came to my apartment and roughed me up in exactly the ways I've been craving. Three days, and my ass cheeks are still tender, filling my head with memories of that night and making my dick hard every time I so much as shift in my seat.

Lorenzo looks at his watch, then glances pointedly at the empty seat next to Xaviaro.

"He's on his way," Xav answers the implied question, his posture relaxed but always slightly alert, like he's constantly ready to jump up and shoot a motherfucker if necessary. It's a good quality to have in your trigger man.

"Sparrow's made it pretty clear he's an independent contractor. Why are we even waiting for him to start our meetings?" Alessio asks.

"Because he's scary," Salvatore answers with a chuckle.

"That it?" Les asks, a shit-eating grin spreading over his lips. "You scared of the crazy little twink, boss?"

Enzo snorts, not dignifying the question with a proper answer. My brother has seen worse shit in his life than a mouthy, Dommy psychopath like Xaviaro's boyfriend, so I'm positive our newest contract employee doesn't so much as spike his heart rate with all the bravado and violence he wears like a cloak. But Lorenzo is also



exceptionally good at weighing the pros and cons of every decision he makes. No way is he scared of Sparrow, but I'm damn sure he doesn't want to deal with the possible theatrics of making him feel slighted either. At least, not without a reason to do so.

Sparrow appears seconds later, saving Enzo the trouble of having to decide whether to start without him or not. He saunters through the club like he owns the place, subtly dragging his fingertips along the back of Xaviaro's neck before pulling out the empty chair and taking his seat.

"Sorry I'm late," he says breezily.

"Is that blood?" Xav asks, leaning over and dragging his thumb along the edge of Sparrow's chin, a frown marring his usually stoic expression.

"Don't worry. It's not mine," Sparrow assures him, tugging the collar of his shirt up to wipe at the spot.

"That's reassuring," Xaviaro mutters, and I notice a slight twitch in his lips. For our ice-veined hitman, it's the equivalent of an emotional outburst.

My heart stumbles over its next beat. Before Sparrow sliced and diced his way into Xaviaro's life, I was working on accepting that the kind of relationship I crave is unrealistic and out of reach. They gave me a fucked-up kind of hope that even twisted souls can have mates. I both love and hate them for that.

Sparrow bares his teeth in a feral grin and leans a little closer to Xaviaro, dropping his voice until it's too low for any of the rest of us to hear what he's saying. But based on the lusty droop of Xaviaro's eyelids and the filthy smirk that stays on Sparrow's face, I'm guessing he's either saying something dirty, or giving him details of the murder he committed on his way to the meeting.

When he's finished, Xaviaro takes Sparrow's face in both hands and gazes into his eyes.

"You are a stunning, bloodthirsty creature."

Sparrow rests his forehead against Xaviaro's. "I love you too."

"Gah, you two are seriously relationship goals." Dante's voice is unexpected. I was so absorbed with the distracting, too-intimate display they were putting on that I didn't notice him approaching the table.

"Yeah?" Sal's gaze traces a lazy path over Dante's scantily clad body. "You looking for your own mafioso to warm your bed at night, angioletto?"

"I don't have any trouble keeping my bed warm, I have trouble finding a man who can keep up with me." The skeptical look he gives Sal with his own slow once-over is more devastating than a direct insult.

Alessio laughs and I rub a hand across my mouth to cover my own amusement.

"You wound me," Salvatore says dryly, putting a hand over his heart dramatically.

Dante rolls his eyes. "I think you'll get over it, playboy. Now, can I get you guys some drinks or anything?"

"We're fine," Enzo answers for all of us.

"Here's a little something for taking Sal's ego down a few notches though," Alessio says with a wink, pulling out a hundred-dollar bill and tucking it into the waistband of Dante's red shorts, pulling his hand back quickly on instinct before he can end up on the long list of men with broken fingers, courtesy of our favorite violent little stripper.

Dante leaves us be, and now that Sparrow's here, we launch into our meeting. It's a lot of the same old, same old—collections updates, the Fitzpatricks caught doing more business right on the edge of the city, practically begging for an all-out war, and an uptick in underaged prostitution that we're working to get a handle on.

"I've got something I wanted to bring to your attention," Salvatore says as things are wrapping up. He turns on his tablet and clicks through some spreadsheets to pull up a specific one, then he nudges it across the table towards Lorenzo.

I lean in to get a look at what he's showing us. From the looks of things, it's rows of numbers showing someone making their regular weekly payments. Everything is in the black, no missed weeks. I frown, and Enzo does the same.

"What am I looking at here?"

"These are the records for The Starlight, that bar on the corner of First and Van Buren, owned by Casimir Zelinski," Sal answers.

"Mm," Lorenzo hums in understanding, scrolling back to the top of the sheet to look it over again with fresh context.

The Starlight was on the verge of going belly-up last spring. When Casimir came to us for a loan to keep things afloat, we were happy to agree. With interest, of course.

It's in a prime location, but the foofy, outdated name and the owner's general lack of business sense haven't done the place any favors. It was a vulture opportunity for us, just circling the corpse of his dying business, waiting for it to sputter out its final breath so we could swoop in and take it over ourselves. All we had to do was wait for him to start missing payments.

"Did he actually manage to turn the place around?" I ask.

Sal shakes his head. “It’s a ghost town. I’ve popped in there on Saturday nights and there hasn’t been a soul in the place. For a guy who came begging on his knees for this loan, he seems to have found some other source of income.”

“I’m not one to complain about someone staying on track with their loan repayments, but...” Enzo trails off, passing the tablet back to Salvatore.

“But if he’s up to some shit right under our nose, we want to know about it,” Xaviaro finishes for him.

“Exactly,” Lorenzo says.

“You want me to look into it?” Xav asks.

I’m sure he won’t have any trouble going in there and scaring the hell out of Casimir, knocking his head around until he spills any and all of his secrets. But I’m wondering if the direct approach is the right one. If he is up to something illegal in our city, he’s not likely to be doing it all on his own.

“I’ll handle it,” I volunteer before Lorenzo can answer him.

My brother raises his eyebrows in surprise, and he’s not the only one.

“Itching to get out on the streets and get your hands dirty?” Alessio asks with a smirk.

“Not everything needs to be messy,” I point out. “Some things require a scalpel rather than a hatchet.”

“And you’re a scalpel?” Xaviaro asks skeptically.

“You want to go and rattle Casimir’s cage that badly?” I counter instead of answering

his question.

Xav shrugs. “Not particularly. If you want him, you can have him.”

“Generous of you,” I mutter.

“Keep me updated on it,” Lorenzo says. “And take some goons with you for muscle if you need to. Don’t be a hero.”

I’m more than capable of handling this myself, but I nod anyway to placate him. I don’t need to drag any of my soldiers around town to sniff out whatever’s rotten at The Starlight. But maybe it wouldn’t be the worst idea to have a little backup.

The memory of Orion holding my gaze with an intense look in his eyes before he set the roll of bills down on my coffee table flickers through my mind, and a slow grin spreads over my lips. If he’s so eager to repay the debt I took care of, maybe I can convince him to do it this way instead.

## ORION

My muscles burn with exertion, the feeling so deeply satisfying that I push myself even harder, leaning into the ache of it, drawing strength from the pain the way I learned to do long before I ever threw my first punch.

“Come on, kid,” I rumble, dancing out of the way of his flying fist. “Spit out the blood and bare your teeth. Find your inner savage and go down swinging. Every fight is life or death.” I land a body blow, and Fitz—the ‘kid’ in question—grunts before taking my advice and coming back even more fiercely.

“That’s it,” I say, ducking another attempted blow just before it can connect. He’s ready for my dodge this time though, coming back with a second swing in the other

direction that catches me off guard and manages to knock me back.

I grin proudly, then take him out at the knees, knocking him onto his back and towering over him. His chest is heaving and his eyes are wild with the same adrenaline I'm sure is shining in mine.

"You're getting there." I shake off my glove and offer my hand to help him up.

"You knocked me on my ass," Fitz points out, letting me haul him to his feet.

"But you managed to clock me for the first time. That's a huge improvement." I grab the towel I left draped in my corner of the boxing ring and uncap my water bottle to guzzle half of it down. Fitz does the same on the other side of the mat, blotting the sweat off his face and rehydrating.

The rhythmic sound of another fighter going a round with the speed bag in the corner is oddly soothing, creating a familiar soundtrack alongside the grunts and chatter coming from others who are sparring, the metallic clangs from the weight training corner, and the low rock music that seems to hold all the other sounds together in a neat little bow.

I've been training Fitz for the past two years, watching him go from a scrawny teenager who couldn't knock over an old lady if he tried, to a half-decent fighter who's nearly ready to climb in the ring against a real opponent. My stomach twists with the chronic guilt that's lived there since the day Fitz walked in here. It's a sick feeling that's constantly warring with the pride that surfaces every time I see an improvement in him. Am I just raising this poor kid like a lamb to the slaughter? Am I feeding him into the same inescapable system of violence that pulled me in too young? One way or another, violence seems to be the only way to survive in Wildcliff. Does that justify the cycle?

“Do some weight training before you call it a night,” I call over to him when he starts to climb out of the ring.

“You got it, coach,” he says, and annoyingly, it reminds me of the breathless way Elio said “ Yes, Boss, ” the other night.

The muscles in the back of my neck twitch and heat unfurls in the pit of my stomach. I have half a mind to go over to his place and spank him again for daring to take up so much of my thoughts this week. Memories of his keening moans and the way his ass jiggled and bounced with every slap have been living rent free in my head. I growl under my breath, ignoring the way my cock tries to swell behind my cup.

“Hey, O’Malley.” I saunter over to the edge of the ring and lean over the ropes to call out to the guy who’s still pounding away at the speed bag. He doesn’t stop, but he does turn his head towards me. “Want to spar?”

If I don’t wear myself out, I actually might end up at Elio’s apartment again after I leave here, and there isn’t any good that can come from that. A flicker of fear crosses O’Malley’s face and he loses his rhythm, missing the bag, then stopping all together.

“Uh, not tonight. I’m, uh...” He trails off without offering an actual excuse, instead just grabbing his towel and water bottle, then making a beeline for the changing room. He throws one more nervous glance over his shoulder at me before he disappears through the door.

“That was fucking weird,” I murmur to myself. Maybe I’ve been bringing too much fight to the training spars here. I definitely don’t go easy on anyone, even during practice, but no one has ever complained before.

I sweep my gaze across the gym, looking for anyone else I might be able to coax into a friendly bout or two, but everyone is either already engaged or avoiding eye contact

like they're as afraid of getting their ass kicked by me as O'Malley was. I huff out a breath and jerk my head towards the entrance when the chime sounds to announce a new arrival. Maybe it'll be someone who isn't afraid of a few bruises.

My eyes land on the newcomer, my veins instantly searing with heat. He's definitely not going to shy away from bruises, but he's also not likely to climb into the ring with me.

Elio's dark eyes meet mine, and he grins slowly, his eyes smoldering as he looks me over like a piece of meat. A few guys glance in his direction before quickly focusing back on their workouts, trying to pretend the underboss of the Moretti family didn't just walk into our gym like he belongs here.

I duck under the ropes, my heart hammering, awareness crackling in the air around me as I cross the gym towards him. The fluorescent lights suddenly feel harsher than usual, the stale smell of sweat and blood choking me with every breath, my footsteps loud in my ears, bringing me closer and closer to Elio with every step.

"Hey, Boss," he greets me in a low voice, that word seeping into my chest and wrapping itself around my insides all over again. The memory of it was bad enough, but hearing it on his lips makes me want to press him up against the nearest wall and either choke him or kiss him. The fact that I can't tell which pisses me off more than anything.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" I hiss, darting a pointed look towards all the other fighters still pretending not to notice Elio. "Are you looking to start a rumor that I'm taking money to throw fights?"

He barks out a laugh, slipping his hands casually into his pockets. "You'd have to actually lose a fight for anyone to believe gossip like that."



I unclench my jaw and grunt. Fine, he makes a good point.

“What do you want?” I ask again.

“I want to take you somewhere. There’s something I want to show you.” He’s still smiling, like he’s just some guy asking me on a date, and not one of the most feared men in the city, coming back again and again no matter how many times I try to convince him to fuck off. If I didn’t hate him so much, I might find his stubborn persistence endearing.

“Why?” Maybe it’s a stupid question after our last two encounters, but I just can’t seem to figure him out. Is it really as simple as lust?

“Because I asked,” he answers, and then his eyes flicker with mischief. “And because you still owe me for the debt I paid off.”

My muscles tense and I grind my teeth together again. I take a step forward, ready to tell him exactly where he can shove the debt I never asked him to pay. Amusement dances in his expression, and I notice a slight blush creeping into his cheeks. He’s winding me up. He’s trying to get under my skin on purpose. Why? So, I’ll get rough with him again?

My cock twitches. I drag my tongue over my bottom lip, tasting the salty flavor of my sweat and weighing the words ‘fuck off’ without actually spitting them out. I don’t need a list of reasons to steer clear of Elio and his whole family, but I have one. There’s no doubt that giving in to this game he’s trying to play with me is going to end badly for me. Even so, I’m human and the curiosity is there. Where does Elio want to take me? What could he possibly have to show me? And why do I care?

“Fine,” I bite the word out harshly. “Let me shower first, and I’ll meet you outside.”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:17 pm*

### Chapter 9

#### ELIO

I lean against the sleek hood of my Jaguar, watching the movement through the large windows that line the front of the MMA gym. I'm paranoid that Orion is going to slip out and take off without me noticing. I wouldn't put it past him to leave me standing here all night, looking like an idiot. I suppose I could hunt him down if he did, drive to his place and pound on his door this time. Or maybe I would find him at that nursing home he's always visiting. Does he volunteer there? Something tells me that isn't it, but digging up the details of who he might be going to see six nights a week feels like a step too far. Borderline stalking him is bad enough, but I can't pretend I regret it.

The point is, I can easily find him if he decides to give me the slip, but I don't want to. I didn't pay off his debt just so he would come after me, but it was certainly an added bonus. How many other ways can I piss him off and get him to chase me around the city in a fit of rage?

A hot tremor rocks through me at the idea, and I grin to myself.

I catch sight of Orion through the window. He looks pissed, which I'm starting to realize seems to be his default. Maybe the scowl is more armor than threat, but I don't know him well enough to be sure yet. I want to, though. I want to peel off his mask and see what's underneath, even if it's only more justifiable rage. His hair is loose and damp, hanging over his shoulders as he strides through the gym with long, purposeful steps. He's mesmerizing, ethereal, fucking gorgeous, and terrifying all at

once. It's laughable now that I spent ten minutes worrying he'd slip out without me noticing him. I couldn't miss Orion if I tried. My eyes are drawn to him like he has his own gravitational pull.

He gathers his hair into a messy knot on top of his head, not breaking his stride as he ties it up out of his face and off his shoulders, using his elbow to push through the door when he reaches it. I hold my breath as he steps out into the night, and his gaze snaps to mine, like he can't escape the pull any more than I can.

I push myself up off the car and jerk my head towards the passenger side. Orion gives a stilted nod and grunts before going around and climbing in. I slide in after him, the smell of his bargain-brand shampoo filling the small space in a matter of seconds. It's something floral and too sweet, offensively covering up the scent of sweat and adrenaline I've started to crave smelling on him after a fight.

"So where are we going?" he asks as I pull out of the parking lot. His tone is gruff, but without the usual edge. Am I starting to wear him down a little? Not much, hopefully. I don't want him domesticated, I just want him tame enough to keep. Actually, I don't need that either. I want him to want me. Outside of that, he can stay as feral as he likes.

"You'll see," I answer with a smirk, drawing a predictable, rumbling growl of frustration from him. The sound vibrates over my skin and hardens my cock. "Who was the kid you were sparring with tonight?" I ask, changing the subject. He arches an eyebrow questioningly and I shrug. "I might have been watching for a few minutes before I came in."

Orion's quiet for a second before he answers. "Fitz Morgan. He's a good kid, hardworking, with a good head on his shoulders. Don't go dragging him into your mob shit."

“Hey, whoa.” I take my hands off the wheel for a split second to hold them up in surrender. “Who said anything about that? I was just making conversation. He’s scrappy. Good form, too.”

He grunts, then clears his throat. “He is,” he says. “You know, he wanted to be a doctor, but he decided he couldn’t afford the tuition. Then his mom got sick, and he’s looking at having to take on his two younger brothers. He’s been training his ass off, earning some money in street fights to put food on the table. He’s hoping to go pro and make enough to really set them up.”

Orion stares out the passenger window, the lights from the passing buildings flickering across his face, his hand resting on the door handle like he’s not sure yet whether he might need to fling the door open and tuck and roll at any second. It’s the most words I’ve ever heard him string together at one time, a mixture of anger and sympathy for Fitz dripping from each and every one of them.

“I’m sorry he has to deal with all that. Life deals out some shit hands, doesn’t she?”

He scoffs, then mutters, “Like you wouldn’t believe.”

My fingers twitch around the steering wheel, and our destination comes into view up ahead. Maybe this was a bad idea. There are at least even odds that this will blow up in my face. Of course, that means there’s an equal chance that I’ll manage to change the way Orion sees me. Here’s hoping it’ll be for the better.

I pull into the parking lot, and he sits up straighter in his seat, squinting through the windshield as if he’s sure he’s seeing things wrong.

“You brought me to a motel?” His voice dips lower. “Is this how you’re planning to collect on the rest of what I owe you?” The familiar irritation in his tone is laced with just enough amusement that I wonder if I was right earlier, if he really is starting to

hate me a tiny bit less than he did before.

He looks over at me, and I notice a savage hunger in his gaze that matches the one gnawing at the pit of my stomach. Whether he still hates me or not, he definitely wants to fuck me. I can work with that. Unfortunately, that's not what we're here for.

"Are you open to that option?" I tease, already knowing the answer.

He grunts again, and I chuckle. Yup, that's exactly the response I was expecting. Orion might not realize it, but I know him. I see all the hard, angry edges, and the rigid morals that hold them in place.

"We're not here to fuck." I ease into a parking spot near the back of the lot. Even in the dark, without a single streetlamp illuminating the lot, I can tell my car sticks out like a sore thumb. That's okay though, we won't be staying long.

"Why are we here then?"

My original plan was to find Orion at the gym tonight and pitch him the idea of helping out with The Starlight project. But the closer I got, the more sure I was that he would tell me to fuck off again. I need him to trust me first.

"I'm going to show you something that might make you hate me a little less," I confess, hoping I'm right. I get out of the car, and I can hear Orion laughing as he does the same.

"Why do you care if I hate you?" He rests his arms on the roof of the car once he climbs out. I can't see his expression in the dark, but he sounds curious and amused.

"If you don't know the answer to that, you may want to consider taking fewer blows to the head on a regular basis."

He huffs another laugh, coming around the back of the car to meet me. “What I meant is that it seems like you get off on the way I hate you.”

We’re close enough now that I can see his face. His eyebrows are pulled together and his eyes roam over my face like he’s studying me. My cock swells at the thought of the heated look in his eyes before he put me over his knee and spanked me like a brat the other night.

“You might have a point there,” I mutter, swaying a little closer to him, but still not touching him.

“Ever consider seeing a therapist about that?” Orion asks blandly, arching one eyebrow.

I smirk. “Nope.”

Orion snorts with amusement and turns his gaze away from my face, leaving me feeling off balance. He looks towards the rundown motel a few yards away, half the letters in the sign burned out, the smell of booze and sex heavy in the air even from here.

“Alright, show me then.”

ORION

Elio’s arm brushes against mine as we make our way through the unlit parking lot towards the motel. There’s a heavy feeling in the air, like we’re being watched. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up, and I let the surge of adrenaline keep me alert, on my toes, my eyes moving at all times, on the lookout for movement. The urge to put an arm around Elio’s shoulders and pull him close nearly makes me laugh. If there’s anyone who doesn’t need my protection, it’s the man next to me. But the

impulse to protect him anyway refuses to release its grip on my insides.

The orange lights of the motel finally reach us, and Elio steers us around the side of the building. He clearly knows where he's going, so I follow him, alert to the muffled sound of moans coming from several rooms and the used needles I have to step over on the sidewalk. Around the corner, there are two out-of-order vending machines, with several girls gathered around in front of them. And by girls, I mean girls . There's no way they're older than fourteen, maybe even younger. All three of them are skinny, wearing skimpy clothing and the kind of blank looks I've seen too many times in my life.

"Jesus," I mutter, bile rising in my throat.

Elio huffs through his nose and picks up his pace when the girls notice us.

"Hey, mister," the smallest of the three says with a smile that doesn't reach her eyes. She has an accent. Russian maybe? "Looking for company?"

"Not tonight," Elio answers with a softness in his voice that makes my chest feel heavy. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out his wallet. "How old are you, bambina ?"

"Old enough," the blond girl behind the small one answers with the same subtle accent, and an edge of defiance that gives me a little spark of hope for her.

"I doubt that," Elio mutters. He pulls out three hundred-dollar bills and they all eye the money warily, no doubt wondering what exactly they'll be asked to do for that amount of cash.

My stomach roils again, and the urge to put myself between him and the girls rises, even though I don't think he's here to hurt them. How many times was I in exactly

their position though? Hungry and desperate, with predators closing in on all sides. If it hadn't been for Jack, I might have ended up standing out here at this same motel, offering up whatever I had to for a few bucks. My bones feel like they're vibrating, and I clench my hands into fists at my sides.

"What do you want?" the third girl pipes up to ask, her gaze fixed on the bills in Elio's hand.

"Tell me who's in charge around here, then take the money and get the hell out of here," he says.

The first girl looks at him skeptically. "What do you want with Daddy?"

A strangled sound rises in my throat, but I swallow it down. Daddy ? Fucking hell, these poor girls. Elio's face hardens too, darkening into something dangerous and threatening that I haven't seen before. It's the kind of expression I've always assigned to people like him in my mind, an unmistakable threat that reminds you to steer clear of them. Until now, I've never seen anything but amusement or lust in his eyes, and maybe this new expression should cement all the terrible things I thought about him, long before we ever met in person. But it does exactly the opposite.

"Daddies don't pimp out their little girls, bambina," Elio says. "And they don't leave bruises like that on them either." I follow his gaze to the deep purple bruise on the small girl's upper arm. "I'm guessing he's in one of these rooms? That way he can keep an eye on you and collect his money, right?" He waves the bills and cranes his neck to look down the row of rooms.

The girls share a look with each other, communicating wordlessly with wide-eyed looks and shakes of their heads.

"We can't leave. He'll... do bad things to us," the third girl says after a moment.



“I promise you, he won’t,” Elio insists before reaching into his pocket again and pulling out three more bills. “Point me to his room, take the cash, and don’t look back.”

The blond steps from behind the small girl and snatches the money out of Elio’s grasp. “Room twelve,” she says.

“Thank you,” Elio says politely. “Mel’s Diner is a few blocks away, down Second Street. Tell him Elio Moretti sent you, and he’ll hook you up with some free food. He might even have some jobs available washing dishes. It’s not glamorous, but it’s not... this .” He gestures at the motel. The small girl nods, then all three of them back away until they reach the corner and take off running.

I watch them go until they’re too far away for me to even see their silhouettes in the dark.

“Jesus,” I murmur again.

“Yeah,” he agrees. “Let’s go pay Daddy a visit.” Elio turns, then hesitates, looking at me over his shoulder. “If you want, you can wait in the car.”

My pulse is still rushing in my ears from everything that’s happened already. None of this feels as real as it should, and I have a feeling I know exactly what’s going to happen next. Elio’s giving me an out. If I don’t want to face it, if I don’t want to see what he really is with my own two eyes, I can sit it out.

I swallow and shake my head. Maybe he’s right. Maybe seeing this will make me hate him less. Or maybe it’ll be exactly the slap in the face I need to remind me what kinds of monsters the Morettis really are. Either way, I feel like I need to see this through.

When we reach room twelve, Elio knocks daintily on the door, the gentle rap completely at odds with the thunder written all over his face, his other hand already tucked under his suit jacket, no doubt wrapped around his gun. It only takes a second before the door swings open. Daddy probably assumed it was one of his girls. A sick satisfaction swells inside of me when his eyes go wide at seeing Elio instead.

He grabs the man by the collar with one hand, pulling out his gun with the other and shoving the pimp into the room. I follow behind, closing the door behind us on the way in. The man stumbles to the floor, scrambling to get back to his feet immediately until Elio cocks his gun and points it at the man's head.

“Stay,” Elio says coolly. “Frank Corrigan. I should have known you were the one selling ass out of this rat trap these days.”

Frank cowers on the ground with his hands up, his posture submissive, the hard rage in his eyes anything but that.

“What the fuck do you want? I pay up every month, just like I'm supposed to. I thought that was the deal to keep you fucking vultures off of me,” he grumbles.

I glance around the room. The place is a dump, but I'd bet money it's a hell of a lot nicer than wherever he keeps the girls when they're not working. There's a greasy takeout bag on the bed and a pile of cash on the nightstand.

Elio tsks through his teeth. “The deal is that you pay your taxes, like every good little boy and girl in Wildcliff. But, Frankie, that doesn't mean that the powers that be—i.e., me —won't pop in for a surprise inspection every once in a while.”

“An inspection?”

“That's right. And it turns out you've been very bad, Daddy . We made it clear when

we sold you a business license that there were rules. Selling ass is one thing, but peddling underage girls or pimping out anyone who's unwilling is strictly against the terms of our agreement." Everything about his body language is pure rage, from the grip on his gun to the uneven draw of his breaths, but his voice is as steady as a surgeon's hand.

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me," Frank scoffs. "It's supply and demand. The pervs around here want young pussy, and I'm just a businessman doing my best to deliver."

"That really the best defense you've got?" Elio asks in a bored voice, taking a step forward and pressing the barrel of the gun to Frank's forehead. "Tell me where you got the girls, and I'll let you go with a warning. Of course, our original agreement will be off, and if I catch you pimping anyone out again, of age or not, then I will kill you."

Frank squirms on his knees, his eyes darting to me like he expects me to save him. Would I if I could? Doubtful.

"If I tell you, I'm dead anyway," he reasons.

"Fair enough." Elio shrugs, then pulls the trigger.

I'm not sure what I'm expecting, but the pop of the gun makes me jump. I whirl away before I can really take in the sight of Frank's blood splattering the wall behind him or the way his lifeless body slumps to the ground.

Elio tucks his gun away, then grabs my arm and pulls me out of the room, the smell of blood and gunpowder sticking in my throat. I'm in a daze as he leads me back to the car, pulling out his phone to make a call on the way. He speaks quietly to whoever's on the other end of the line, telling them the location before hanging up.

“Were you calling the police?” I ask, feeling numb by the time we reach his car.

He chuckles. “No. I was calling for one of my guys to come clean this up and dump the body.”

“Oh.” I nod and lean against the hood of the car.

He steps between my legs, moving in close until he’s pressed up against me. I feel like I should flinch away. I just watched him shoot a man in cold blood. But for all the chaos swirling inside of me, all the disgust and shock, none of it is aimed at Elio.

“Those three girls probably weren’t the only ones. Even if he’d given up whoever had sold them to him, he would have kept pimping the others out. Maybe he would have moved to a new city to stay off our radar, or switched motels, but he wasn’t about to have a ‘come to Jesus’ moment and give up the easy money that came along with abusing them,” he says matter-of-factly.

“I know.” I drag in a slow breath, feeling steadier with each passing second. “I know,” I say again more firmly the second time. “He was...” I shake my head, not having a strong enough word to brand a man like that with.

Elio’s eyes bore into mine, a flicker of something that looks like relief passing through them in the darkness. He nods. “I’m not going to tell you that my family are a bunch of saints. We make our living on the wrong side of the law. We leave a trail of blood and bodies in our wake when we have to. It’s ugly. But there are much sicker people in this city than us.” He drags his fingertips along my cheek, and I lean into his touch automatically, the healing cut on my jaw itching with the near glance. “We’re the monsters that keep this city from being even worse than it is.”

A confusing tangle of emotions knots in my gut, too much to sort out right here and now. It’s so much easier to keep hating Elio and everything he stands for. It’s

supposed to be easier, anyway. But even that burning rage that's become a comforting presence in my chest whenever he's around doesn't feel quite the same as it did an hour ago.

I snag his belt with two fingers and tug at him, even though it's impossible to pull him any closer. His chest is already right up against mine, his hips pressed to mine, our faces only an inch apart. I let my eyes roam over his face up close like this, seeing him clearly for the first time. There are faint bags under his eyes, like he wouldn't know the meaning of a good night's sleep if it slapped him in the face, and a faint scar over his left eyebrow that I'm tempted to brush my lips against for some reason.

Elio doesn't make a sound. He doesn't move. He just lets me stare at him for so long it should be awkward. But the feelings that squirm and pulse inside of me are anything but that. Sizzling tendrils of anger that took root decades ago and never quite fizzled out, a hungry feeling that settles heavily between my legs and becomes more insistent with every passing second and needy look from Elio, and an entire writhing heap of other things that I would probably need therapy to sort out.

I'm desperate for something to ground me, something simple to wrap my hands around and take control of. Something uncomplicated and easy to understand. Elio's next exhale flutters against my lips, and I'm moving before the conscious decision to do so registers in my brain.

Elio lets out a surprised gasp, the sound muffled by my mouth crashing into his, rough and ravenous, hungry for the taste of him. My heart beats so hard that I'm sure he can feel it pounding against his chest, just like I can feel the vibration of his next stifled moan in mine. He sags into me, melting under my touch. The intoxication of him submitting with barely a flick of my tongue against the seam of his lips makes my head spin and my dick throb.

I want to tangle my fingers in his hair and force him to his knees, I want to drag him

over my lap and spank his ass red again, and I want to kiss him so hard and deep that he can't remember how to breathe on his own.

I run my tongue along the crease of his lips again, catching his next moan and growling into his mouth as I shove my tongue inside. His mouth is soft and pliant, his tongue sweetly addictive as it tangles with mine, giving me everything I demand, then dancing away to tease me. I was right about Elio, he's a brat through and through, getting off on winding me up just to see how rough I'll get with him.

I bite his bottom lip, and he hisses and then groans, jerking his hips to grind his hard cock against mine. I can feel the heat of his arousal, the shape of his eager, throbbing cock through the thin layers of clothing between us.

A coil of tension inside my chest unravels, and I slide one hand around the back of his neck to hold him close, to tilt his head back and explore more of his mouth. Licking deeper, biting harder, swallowing and savoring every shiver and groan Elio feeds me.

I break the kiss, and he gasps the same way he did when our mouths first connected, like the shock of the kiss ending is just as startling as the idea that I would kiss him in the first place.

"Give me a ride home." It's not a question, it's a command, and another flutter of relief relaxes his face, his damp lips parting on a sigh and his eyelids drooping.

"Yes, Boss."

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:17 pm*

### Chapter 10

#### ELIO

“Turn left at the next light,” Orion says, his voice deep and gruff. I’d like to think it’s from the kiss, if you can even call it that. It feels like an insult to lump what he just did to me with his lips and tongue back in that seedy parking lot in with the cursory, obligatory trading of spit with someone before you can fuck them.

I dart my tongue out and drag it along my bottom lip, greedy for another taste of him. Unfortunately, I’ve already licked it all away.

“I know where you live,” I assure him, taking the turn when I reach the light and switching lanes, so I’ll be ready for the next one that’s only one more block up.

“That’s right. You’ve been stalking me for months.” He says it so matter-of-factly that I can’t help but sputter a laugh.

“I wouldn’t say stalking. Stalking implies a certain amount of...”

“Obsession,” Orion supplies, and fine, maybe he’s not wrong.

I chuckle again and glance over at him, my cock still rock hard from letting him dominate my mouth, my head swirling with questions about everything else that went down at the motel and how he feels about it. But I’m not sure how to ask. “Hey, how are you feeling about watching me shoot a man in the head?” just doesn’t feel like the right approach.

I ease my foot off the gas as we near his building. Does he want me to drop him off? Or does he want me to come inside so he can finish what he started? There's an electric kind of anticipation in not knowing which, and in leaving the decision in his hands. I want to follow him inside, strip bare, and let him use me to work out the deep wells of rage and desperation inside of him. But only if he tells me to. I want the growled command more than I've ever wanted anything.

"Park there," he says, pointing at a spot not far from the door. I do as he says, claiming the empty spot and putting the Jag into park. Her engine purrs as it idles, my hands lingering on the wheel, waiting for his next demand. "I can't promise it's safe to leave a car this nice in a neighborhood like this," he warns.

"I don't give a fuck about the car, Boss. If you want me to hand the keys over to the first crackhead who walks by, I'll do it and I'll just buy another stupid, overpriced hunk of metal on four wheels tomorrow."

An annoyed sound rumbles in Orion's throat and he reaches over to turn the key, killing the engine.

"There you go again, all mindless privilege and fucking spoiled bullshit." The hard edge in his voice is different from how it was before—less dangerous, less... seething. But it has the same effect, sending electric jolts down my spine and heat skittering over my skin. My cock twitches and I shift in my seat.

He flings open the passenger door and stuffs my keys into his pocket as he climbs out.

"Come on, Brat," he barks.

I scramble out after him, my mouth going dry, a pathetic whimper rising in my throat. I'm vaguely aware that someone might recognize me, but it's impossible to care what



they might see or think when every ounce of my energy is being spent on keeping myself upright as I hurry after Orion. He's a few steps ahead of me the whole way, pausing to hold the door just long enough for me to follow him inside. He jogs up the stairs to the second floor, not stopping to look over his shoulder or slowing to make sure I'm still behind him. It's like he couldn't care less if I'm coming or not, and fuck if that doesn't make me reach for my throbbing cock as I race up the steps behind him.

I take in the peeling wallpaper in the hallway and the rat trap laid on the landing at the top of the stairs without really seeing them. The faint, muffled sounds of TVs playing and conversations being had come and go as I pass each apartment door on the way down the hallway. I finally catch up to him when he stops to unlock his door, inserting his key into three different locks before pushing it open and stepping inside.

The floor creaks under my shoes as I step in after him and close the door behind me. A stale smell of mold lingers in the air, just managing to overpower the distinct scent of Orion that fills the apartment. I'm curious what his place is like. What type of furniture did he pick out? Is he the Spartan kind of decorator or will there be personal touches that give me the chance to know him better? But I barely have the chance to let my eyes adjust to my surroundings before he spins towards me and wraps his fist around my tie to drag me in for another punishing kiss.

I stumble into him, bracing my hands on his chest, bunching the soft material of his t-shirt in my fists. He yanks on my tie with one hand and tangles the other in my hair. My cock heaves and jerks, a whimper tightening my throat.

"You know what, Brat?" he murmurs against my lips between biting kisses. "I think I feel bad for you. You've probably never appreciated a damn thing in your life, have you?"

My brain stutters over the question. If this is supposed to be dirty talk, I have to admit

it's... confusing. The condescending undertone is definitely doing it for me though. Luckily, he doesn't wait for me to work out an answer. He keeps talking as he drags me down the hallway by my hair and tie.

“When everything is easy and everything is disposable, it's impossible to give a fuck about any of it. How do you think it feels to want something and know you can't have it?”

Orion shoves his tongue back into my mouth and I shiver. I try to imagine the desperation of what he's describing. I want to tell him that's exactly how I've been craving him for months now, with a hopeless, urgent greed that didn't feel like it would ever be sated. But deep down, there's always been part of me that knew I could wear him down. Every time he looked at me with burning contempt in his eyes, it just made me more determined to have him.

“Do you have any idea how sweet it feels to get your hands on something you were sure was out of reach?” he goes on, pulling me through the door to his bedroom and turning us around so my back is to his bed.

The space is so small that it only takes two shuffling steps before I'm tumbling onto the bed, my scalp stinging and my lungs burning for deep breaths I can hardly manage to gulp down. Orion towers over me, standing next to the bed and looking at me with a predatory gleam in his eyes that has my hand twitching towards my cock. He knocks it back with a reflexive slap before I get anywhere near it.

He braces a hand on the bed next to my head, the other still wrapped around my tie, pulling it tight around my throat, and leans in until his nose is half an inch from mine. “I'm going to show you how it feels to be fucking desperate, Elio.”

The threatening growl in his voice tightens around my balls and makes my cock leak, precum spilling hot and sticky inside my briefs. My hips jerk up, and I groan when I

make contact with the hard shape of his erection. Orion flattens himself against me, pinning me to the bed with the weight of his body, brushing his lips over mine again without actually kissing me.

“Strip, Brat,” he demands before pushing off me, leaving me feeling cold without his body heat surrounding me.

Orion unwinds my tie from around his knuckles and then crosses his arms, staring down at me expectantly, both eyebrows raised, an almost bored look on his face, like he cares less about getting me naked than he does about making me do as he says. Humiliation heats my face and another slick burst of precum dampens my underwear. I reach up with trembling fingers to undo my tie first.

It’s wrinkled, and the knot is compressed enough that it takes both hands for me to undo it. Once I have it off, he holds his hand out. I hand it over and Orion grunts and nods, a wordless demand to keep going. I kick off my shoes, letting them fall one at a time next to the bed, before I shrug off my jacket and unstrap my holster. Then, I start to work open the buttons on my shirt one by one.

The room is silent except for the sound of our breathing and the white noise of traffic from the street below. Several tendrils of hair broke loose from the messy bun on top of his head at some point, giving him a wild look that matches the untamed glint in his eyes, both completely at odds with the disinterested mask he’s holding in place.

My breathing ratchets up with every inch of skin I expose, but Orion’s stays steady, his eyes tracking my progress as my shirt slowly falls open. I tug it loose from my pants and finish the last few buttons, then shrug it off the same way I did with my jacket. I reach for my belt next, and he holds his hand out for that too. I hand it over, the metal jangling as he wraps his fist around it. I bite my lip against a groan as I unzip my pants, the vibration of the zipper over my overeager shaft almost enough to make me embarrass myself. I hook my fingers in my pants and underwear, dragging

them down at the same time, lifting my hips off the bed then kicking them the rest of the way off when they're low enough.

He drags his gaze over my exposed body, bare and completely on display in the harsh light of his bedroom. My thighs tremble slightly, spread so he can stand between them, my cock stiff and leaking against my belly, my nipples pebbled but half hidden by my dark chest hair. I squirm against the urge to cover myself when his attention gets to be too much and not enough at the same time. I want him to touch me. I want him to tell me he hasn't stopped thinking about me since I deep throated his cock in that seedy fucking bathroom. I want him to call me a brat again, flip me over, and spank my ass so hard I cry. But he doesn't do any of that. He just stares .

I squirm and make an impatient noise. A slow, devious grin spreads over his lips, and my breath catches in my throat.

## ORION

The wide-eyed look of worry on Elio's face is almost as satisfying as the drip, drip, drip of precum pooling on his stomach. His cock flexes and another whiny sound vibrates past his lips. I let out a low, dangerous chuckle and crawl onto the bed to straddle him, holding myself over him with my legs on either side of his hips. His dick jerks again, bumping against my aching balls.

Elio moans and reaches for me, groping at my chest, tugging on my t-shirt, groaning, and writhing underneath me. I bite back another laugh. If he's this impatient already, he's in for a long night. I wrap his belt around his wrist, pulling the end through the loop and tugging it tight. He stills, his lips parting and his breath catching.

"What..."

"I already told you," I say gruffly, grabbing his other hand and wrapping it in the belt

too. “I’m going to show you what it’s like to want something and not be able to have it. I’m going to teach your spoiled, privileged ass how much better things are when you’ve had to hurt for them first.”

His pupils widen and his cheeks turn pink. With both of his hands bound, I yank on the loose end of the belt, forcing him to awkwardly worm his way up the bed, pushing with his feet, doing his best to scramble fast enough to keep up with me. I slip the end between the posts of the headboard and secure him to it.

Elio tugs at it, testing the strength of his restraints. If he were really trying to get loose, it probably wouldn’t be enough, but it’ll do for tonight’s purposes. I climb off him and take a second to admire the sight of him bound to my bed, horny, helpless . His gun is lying, still strapped into his holster, near the foot of the bed. If I wanted him dead, it would be the easiest thing in the world. He must know that too, but he let me tie him up anyway.

The life and death stakes of his trust adds an addictive sweetness to his submission that sears its way through my veins and rearranges things inside of me. Things that were probably better left where they were, but can’t be pushed back now that they’ve shifted. I palm my cock through my sweatpants and imagine a world where Elio isn’t who he is, a world where he’s just a man who’s hungry for my violence without all the other complications.

“Okay, I’m desperate, can you do something now?” he pants.

I smirk, then run my tongue over my teeth with a tut .

“You don’t know the meaning of desperate yet.” I let go of my cock and lean over him, brushing my lips lightly over the tight, hard nub of his nipple. I flick it with my tongue, savoring the gasp he lets out and the quickening of his breath, then I bite down hard, tugging it roughly between my teeth until he screams before I release it.

“But you will,” I promise.

“Fuck,” he murmurs, putting his feet flat on the bed and arching his hips, fucking the air without any relief.

I stand back up and wipe the back of my hand over my lips. Then, I start to gather up his scattered clothes, taking my time folding each item and placing them on top of my dresser. I take care with his gun, setting it on top of everything else. The creak of my bedsprings and the moody little huffs he lets out every so often only convince me to move slower, not just picking up his clothes, but leisurely tidying the small space as if I don’t have a mob boss tied to my bed.

“Orion,” Elio spits my name through clenched teeth, and I look at him over my shoulder while I straighten up my underwear drawer.

“Did you want something?” I ask, arching my eyebrow and ignoring the steady throb in my cock.

“Yes,” he hisses.

“Oh?” I slide the drawer closed. “And what’s that?”

“You. Your cock. Your... something .” He bucks and tugs at the belt around his wrists.

“Hm. Now that you mention it, I could use a little... relaxation.” I open the next drawer down and push aside my t-shirts to grab the bottle of lube and the toy I keep stashed inside. I’ve lived alone for years now, but the habit of hiding sex toys seems to have stuck with me anyway.

I toss them onto the foot of the bed and Elio moans, his cock flexing and twitching,

the tip a deep color that makes my own dick throb with sympathy. I peel my shirt off and toss it aside. Taking a slow step towards the bed, I hook my fingers around the waistband of my pants, watching the way his chest flutters with every heavy breath. Every one of the strangled sounds he makes belongs to me. The swollen dampness of his lips belongs to me too. The slick of precum trickling into his belly button is mine . The heady power of it all makes me want to call off the game in favor of climbing on top of him and rutting wildly. But where's the fun in that? Besides, he really does need a lesson in desperation.

I shove my pants and underwear down in one motion and step out of them. My heavy cock sways between my legs as I climb onto the bed again, straddling him in the same position as before. He bucks his hips, his cock bumping against my balls again. The slick head of his cock dragging over my tight, sensitive sac makes my eyelids flutter. I moan and wrap my hand around the base of my erection, holding myself up on my knees so it's impossible for him to do anything more than tease himself by thrusting against me.

I reach for the lube and the soft, rubbery cock sleeve on the foot of the bed. Elio holds his breath, his muscles quivering and his chest fluttering with stuttered breaths as he watches me open the bottle of lube and drizzle it onto my cock.

"Fuck me. Please, Orion, Boss, please. Fuck..." he pleads, the metal on the belt rattling with his thrashing, his stomach hollowing and expanding.

"Is that what you want?" I taunt him, wrapping my fingers around my shaft again and stroking myself slowly, spreading the lube from root to tip, teasing my thumb over the head with each upstroke. "You want my cock stretching your hole? You want me to pound you until I fill you up with my cum?"

Elio bobbles his head. "Yes. Yes. Please ."

I bare my teeth in another smirk and brace a hand on the pillow, leaning in to bring my lips right next to his ear.

“Then I’m going to give you an answer that probably no one in your life has ever given you before,” I whisper. “No.” I nip at his earlobe, and he howls.

I sit back up and grab the cock sleeve. I don’t want to admit how many times I’ve used it since the first time Elio sucked me off. I jerked myself off with it over and over, until my balls were sore and my cock was raw, thinking about the mouthy criminal who’s now tied up beneath me.

The soft, textured silicone stretches around my cock as I shove myself inside of it with a moan. The throaty sound Elio makes is half lust, half outrage, like he can’t believe I’m fucking a toy when his ass is on offer. Honestly, that makes two of us.

I grit my teeth and hold his gaze as I stroke myself faster and faster, the wet, sloppy sound of the lubed toy on my cock almost loud enough to overtake the grunts and groans rumbling in both our chests and the squeak of the bedsprings.

“You’re going to watch me cum, Brat,” I growl. “You’re going to whimper and moan for me while I spill inside this toy instead of inside you. And then you’re going to go home and you’re going to think about how badly you want it. You’re going to think about it until you go half insane from it.”

“Please,” he begs, the word coming out as a desperate sob.

“No,” I say again, taking pleasure in denying him, but also in the way his expression contorts in ecstasy, like he’s getting off just as much on being denied.

I tighten my grip around the toy and dig my fingers into the pillow next to his head, huffing and groaning, jerking my hips to fuck into the toy, imagining that it is Elio’s



ass, hot and tight around my cock. My orgasm crashes into me without much warning, punching a moan from my chest as my balls constrict and my cock starts to pulse.

I flatten myself on top of Elio and sink my teeth into the corded muscles of his neck, my knuckles and the back of my hand dragging over his cock as I stroke myself through the waves of pleasure. He lets out a strangled cry, and hot, sticky ropes of his release paint the back of my hand and cling to the outside of the cock sleeve.

We grind together until we're both breathless and spent, with cum clinging to both of us, and dripping out of the toy. I slip it off my cock and toss it aside. Then, I drag my fingers through the pools of Elio's cum streaked across both of our bellies.

His eyes are only open to slits, but he parts his lips obediently when I bring my finger near them. I push my finger into his mouth, pressing it against his hot, wet tongue as he licks it clean. He makes a quiet, greedy noise when I slip it free again, glistening with his saliva.

I reach up to loosen the belt from around his wrists, examining the red marks it left behind. I frown and massage my thumb over the angry red indent on his left wrist, seeing if it will fade.

"I'm fine," he mumbles, sounding half drunk and faraway. He flexes his fingers, like he's trying to prove there's no damage done.

"It looks like you'll have bruises for at least a few days." The satisfaction in my voice makes it impossible for him to mistake the statement for an apology. I like the idea of Elio walking around with marks under his clothes more than I should. I like it enough to want to bite him in a few more places before I let him out of my bed.

"Good," he echoes my thoughts, slightly more alert this time, his voice raw and

rasping.

Without thinking, I draw his wrist to my lips and press a kiss against the bruise. Then, I do the same to the other, scraping my teeth over it for good measure before releasing him. Elio's breath catches and he squirms under me again.

Maybe I'll keep him here another couple of hours, tie him up again once we've both recovered and drill the lesson into his head one more time. Maybe I should just leave the Mafia brat bound to my headboard until I've turned him into an upstanding citizen. I choke back a snort at the thought. It would be like chaining a tiger to a radiator and hoping to turn it into a house cat. You can only keep it as long as it's willing to be kept. I wonder how long Elio would stay.

And maybe he's right that his brutality is all that's standing between this city and a much worse fate than the Morettis. How the fuck should I know? I'm just one man wildly throwing punches to keep my head above water. It's possible that's all Elio is doing too.

"I... should probably go."

His words startle me. It's not like I expected him to beg to stay the night and cuddle, but we've barely caught our breath and he's already making his escape. I'm sure he'd rather be home in his shiny fucking penthouse than all tangled up in my cheap sheets that might as well be made of sandpaper compared to whatever million thread count bullshit he has on his own bed. I chafe at the thought, battling between the urge to show him the door if he's so eager to get away, or to pin him down and refuse to let him leave until I'm good and ready.

I grind my teeth and flex my fingers roughly around his wrists before releasing him.

"Yeah," I grunt, climbing off of him.

Neither of us say a word as he gets dressed. I'm being the petulant brat now, pouting silently as I watch him pull on one piece of clothing at a time, covering up the miles of skin I've barely had a chance to explore. He looks up at me as he buttons his shirt, his hands steady now, in contrast to the way they trembled earlier when he fumbled to undo each one. Elio opens his mouth, then closes it again.

"Spit it out," I demand, my teeth still clenched together.

He shakes his head and finishes with his shirt. I growl under my breath. If he were really mine, I'd grab him by the hair and drag him back to bed, then spank him until whatever words are stuck on his tongue came spilling out. But he's not. At least... I don't think he is.

I huff and shake my head, more at myself than at Elio as he silently does up his wrinkled tie, putting himself back together like tonight didn't even happen.

Maybe it's a good thing he's leaving. My head isn't on straight at all, and it's not going to get there as long as he's here, spinning it around over and over. A few hours ago, I thought he was the devil incarnate, and now... now I don't know what the fuck I think.

Once he's dressed, I walk him out of my bedroom and back down the short hallway to my door, hoping he isn't spending too much time looking at the sad state of my apartment. Would he be able to tell that my couch was fished out of the trash just by looking at it? I don't know, and I don't really want to find out. The last thing I need is for Elio to think I'm the one who needs to be taken care of.

He stops with his hand on the doorknob, dragging his free hand through his hair and looking back at me over his shoulder.

"Would you meet me somewhere tomorrow?"

“Where?” My shoulders tighten at the thought of another outing like the one we had tonight.

“The Starlight. It’s a bar on—”

“I know where it is,” I cut him off. “I’ll...” I clear my throat. He’s already managed to pull me in deeper than I should have let him. Like quicksand. “I’ll think about it.”

Elio nods. “I’ll be there at six,” he says, before opening the door and slipping out without another word, leaving me alone in my apartment feeling like I’ve been KO’d, with my head swimming and my ears ringing. Am I going to meet him tomorrow?

I have no fucking clue.

### Chapter 11

#### ORION

After a morning spent beating the hell out of the punching bag at the gym and failing to convince anyone to spar with me yet again, my thoughts are no less twisted up than they were last night.

I slept like shit, tossing and turning, ping-ponging between being pissed at Elio for leaving and annoyed at myself for caring. I spent another hour or so before sunrise trying to guess why he would want to meet me at a dive like The Starlight, spinning scenarios in my head that became more and more outlandish the more tired I got, until I eventually crashed and managed a couple hours of sleep.

I take the steps of the care facility two at a time. There have been a million times over the past few years that I wished like hell things were different, for Jack's sake and for my own selfish reasons. This morning, it's definitely the latter.

I want to be able to tell my brother about last night. All of it. I want to vomit this confused tangle of emotions at his feet and let him help me sort them out. He was always good at that—talking me down when my emotions got too high, settling me down when my thoughts turned into a tornado. But this situation is so tangled up in shit I can't tell Jack. Pulling at any of the threads would unravel the whole thing. I'd have to tell him about the loan I took out from the Morettis, about the underground fights and his mounting medical bills.

I push through the door and the familiar smell of antiseptic burns the back of my

throat. I force a smile and approach the desk to sign in, but instead of the normal friendly greeting, the blond receptionist grimaces. My heart forces its way into my throat and my limbs go numb in an instant.

“What happened? Is Jack okay?”

She pulls her expression together, turning it into a sympathetic half smile. “He’s fine. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to worry you, I just wasn’t expecting to see you this morning. You didn’t get the voicemail the doctor left you?” She tucks her hair behind her ear and fidgets with her pen, tapping the tip of it on the desk, leaving black dots of ink on the glossy surface.

I shake my head and reach for my phone, pulling it out of my back pocket. “I was at the gym all morning,” I mutter. As promised, there is a voicemail waiting for me. I click on the notification and bring the phone to my ear to listen.

“ Good morning, Mr. Barros. This is Doctor Simmons. I’m calling to let you know that we’ve been monitoring a mild cough Jack has had for a few days, and unfortunately, it has progressed into full-blown pneumonia. I know we’ve discussed before how serious pneumonia is for someone in your brother’s condition, so I called for medical transport to move him to Wildcliff General. He’s under the care of Doctor Ross. If you have any questions, feel free to call me back. ” The numbness in my limbs spreads through the rest of my body as I listen to Doctor Simmons’s polite, detached voice relaying the information.

When the message ends, I shove my phone back into my pocket and mutter a, “Thanks,” to the receptionist before pivoting back towards the doors I just came through.

I hate that my first thought as I step back outside is that Jack’s insurance isn’t going to cover the cost of the medical transport from Shady Oaks to Wildcliff General. Last

time he had to be moved, I got a bill for nearly six thousand dollars in the mail. The muscle in my jaw twitches as I do a mental calculation of how many fights it's going to take to make up that amount on top of all the regular expenses. One good underground fight should do it though. The nearly healed cut on my face twinges, but I ignore it.

The hospital is practically on the other side of the city, but the dollar signs still floating through my mind keep me from hailing a cab. Six thousand for the transport, plus fuck knows how many days he'll have to be on a ventilator in intensive care. Those costs add up so fast they'll make me sick if I let myself think too hard about it. And fuck knows what the insurance will try to wiggle out of paying for. I swallow down the bile rising in my throat and walk faster.

Maybe selling my soul to the Morettis is the best way out of this. How much would they be willing to pay? Resentment is bitter on my tongue. Resentment towards Elio and his family for having the kind of money that would make all this shit easier, towards the stupid prick who hit Jack too hard in the first place, towards Jack for being at that underground fight when he was already well on his way to being a fucking all-star in the Ultimate Fighting League, and at the goddamn world for dropping all of this on my shoulders without the option to tap out, no matter how heavy it gets.

I'm so caught up in my thoughts that the sight of the hospital looming over me startles me for a second. The automatic doors slide open in front of me, and I step inside. The antiseptic smell is a thousand times worse here than it is at Shady Oaks, making me gag. It resurrects the tight, panicked feeling in my chest, throwing me straight back to that night a lifetime ago when I paced the waiting room of this hospital, praying to a god I don't believe in that my brother would be okay. I drag in a slow breath through my nose that does nothing whatsoever to calm me.

I've spent enough time at Jack's bedside in the intensive care unit here to know the

way without needing to read any of the signs. I don't have the energy to even fake a smile when I reach the reception desk.

The man behind the desk has messy red hair and a face full of freckles. He looks too young to be wearing a pair of scrubs, even as a nurse, but what the fuck do I know.

"Hey, my brother is here. Jack Barros." My voice sounds rough and lifeless in my own ears. He gives me that same irritating, sympathetic smile they must teach medical professionals to use in school, then checks Jack's file.

"It looks like Doctor Ross is scheduled to check in on him in about an hour, so if you want to talk to him, he'll be able to go over Jack's condition and answer any questions. For right now, we do have him on a mild sedative, so he might be a little out of it, but you're welcome to go in and sit with him. He's in room three." He points to the third curtain to the left of the nursing station. "And I know that the ventilator looks pretty scary, but he is stable at the moment. I'm sure he'll be glad to see a friendly face."

"Thanks." I give a jerky nod, then head for the room that he pointed to.

I slide back the curtain and step inside the brightly lit room. It's not the first time I've seen him hooked up to all the wires and tubes, but it makes my skin crawl and my heart thunder the same way every time. He blinks his eyes open slowly, and this time I do quirk my lips in a grin.

"This is about that cute nurse who kept flirting with you the last time you were here, isn't it?" I tease. I can tell by the crinkle in the corner of his eyes that he would laugh if he could. "Maybe this time you can close the deal and wife her up already," I say, grabbing the chair from the corner and dragging it across the floor towards his bed. "I know what you're thinking. 'How am I going to get her to fall in love with me with a tube down my throat?' but hear me out here, because I think not being able to talk



might actually work for you.”

His hand twitches weakly, and he lazily flips his middle finger at me. I chuckle, hoping he doesn’t notice the way the sound gets caught in my throat for a second.

I’ve become a master at keeping up a one-way stream of chatter to fill the silence and cover the steady beeping of all the machines in the room. So, that’s exactly what I do. I spend the next hour rambling about the many adventures of Mrs. Stevens’s wandering cat and Fitz’s progress at the gym, responding to the cadence of Jack’s blinks and the subtle twitches of his expression as if they’re full sentences.

Dr. Ross comes in eventually and shows me Jack’s chest x-rays, breaking down all the medical mumbo jumbo into the easily digestible bottom line that things don’t look too bad right now, but the quadriplegia complicates things. I’ve heard most of it before. I’ve spent plenty of nights sleeping in a chair just like this one next to Jack’s bed, with the knowledge swimming in my head that pneumonia is the leading cause of death for people with his condition.

“We’ve got him on intravenous antibiotics for now, and we’re monitoring him closely. Now, it’s up to his body to do what it needs to do,” he concludes, and I nod.

“Right. Thanks, Doc.” I shake his hand, then stay out of his way while he finishes checking Jack over.

After the doctor leaves, I switch on the TV and sit with Jack until his eyes drift closed. Like an internal alarm, at five-thirty I stand up and push the chair back into the corner of the room. I’m not sure when I actually made the decision to go through with meeting Elio, but it feels inevitable. Maybe I decided last night when he asked, and I just needed to pretend I might make a different choice.

ELIO

Salvatore wasn't kidding when he said this place was a ghost town. There wasn't even a bartender behind the bar when I stepped inside The Starlight half an hour ago. When one finally did show up, he looked confused to see a customer. There's no way Casimir is making his payments with the bar itself.

Just to be sure, I had Sparrow do a quick check of Casimir's financials this morning and he doesn't have any other legit business assets. What he does have is a number of direct deposits into his bank account from a shell corporation based in the Caymans.

I take a measured sip of the cheap Scotch in my glass, my eyes glued to the door as the minutes tick closer to six o'clock. Is Orion going to show? I drag the rim of my glass against my bottom lip and let the memory of his grunts and growls last night echo in my ears. My eyes flutter closed for a second and I suck in a deep breath, the smell of the Scotch and the musty stench of the bar filling my lungs.

The air shifts and the sound of traffic from outside intensifies. My eyes spring open, and sure enough, the door is in the process of swinging closed behind Orion. He looks the way he usually does, dressed in athletic clothing, his hair pulled up out of the way like he just came from a workout or a fight. But as he crosses the bar towards my table, I notice something different in his eyes. They look even more wild than usual, filled with the kind of panic fit for a caged animal. Did something happen?

I sit up a little straighter in my seat and gesture to the bartender to bring another round. The man nods and turns to fill another glass with the same bottom shelf booze he gave me. The chair across from me scrapes noisily against the wood floor, jarringly loud in the desolate bar. Maybe meeting here to discuss things wasn't the best plan. It might be private, but it's hardly subtle if the bartender has any idea about what's going on behind the scenes. He might end up tipping off Casimir to our suspicions before I've had a chance to look into things. But it's done now, so we might as well have a drink and deal with Casimir if the problem comes up.

“You made it.” I let a slow smile spread over my lips, my dick hardening eagerly as Orion claims the seat across from me, his expression thunderous and savage, exactly the way I like it.

“I made it,” he agrees, grunting in thanks when the bartender sets the drink down in front of him. Orion picks the glass up and downs the Scotch in a few gulps, his throat bobbing as he swallows. He sets the glass on the table with more force than necessary and wipes the back of his hand over his mouth.

The tension rolling off him in waves has me shifting in my seat and leaning across the table to get a few inches closer to him as I study his expression for clues about what caused his mood. I want to reach over and brush the stray hairs back off his forehead. I want to drop to my knees and slink under the table to cheer him up the best way I know how. I want to be the person he wants to tell his problems to, and that feels like a hell of a lot more to ask than simply wanting him not to hate me anymore.

“Do you want another drink?” I offer, tilting my head back to empty my own glass, then signaling the bartender again without waiting for Orion’s reply.

“I want to know what your problem is,” he says gruffly, his hand still wrapped around his empty glass, his eyebrows pulling together as he stares at me with mounting heat in his eyes.

“My problem?” I echo. My heart rate kicks up. Is this another game like last night? Is it foreplay? Or did I actually piss him off when I left last night?

Orion’s hand darts out so fast it’s nothing but a blur. I couldn’t dodge it if I wanted to, and I definitely don’t want to. He wraps his fist around my tie just like he did last night and hauls me halfway across the table, rattling our empty glasses and making the legs of the table grind against the floor the same way his chair did when he sat down. His face is a few inches from mine, his teeth bared, and his nostrils flaring

with each breath. The panic I noticed in his eyes when he came in is still there, buried under a layer of rage.

“Why were you so eager to leave?” he demands. His breath bathes my face, heavy with the smell of Scotch. My lips ache for him to kiss me again the way he did last night, hard and hungry, like he fucking owns me.

It takes several seconds for my brain to catch up with the fact that he asked me a question.

“Because I wanted to stay.” It’s too simple of an explanation for the way everything crashed down around me last night after he untied me, but it’s the best I can do. It was like he made me feel so damn good, so fucking right that when it ended, nothing else felt real. It was too much, and I was so greedy for more that I knew if I didn’t leave, I never would.

His fingers twitch and he releases his grip on my tie. I flatten it out and ease back into my chair.

“The next time I put you in my bed, you’re going to keep your ass there until I decide I’m finished with you,” Orion growls, not even glancing at the bartender as he sets down our second round of drinks.

My dick jerks and my lips twitch. “The next time, huh?”

“I’m not fucking around with you, Brat.” The tense edge in his voice makes me flinch and nearly start panting.

I swallow hard and nod. “Yes, Boss.”

“Good boy,” he murmurs the words quietly, but they boom in my ears as if he

shouted them through a megaphone. They knock me off balance and make me shift eagerly in my seat. I didn't know how satisfying it would be to earn praise from him after all the harsh words I've greedily lapped up, always desperate for them to sting a little more. But Orion calling me his good boy is as soothing as the feeling of his lips brushing softly against my bruised wrists was last night.

I clear my throat and reach for the fresh drink, but I don't bring it to my lips, I just wrap my hand around the glass and try to slow my breathing.

"So, why did we meet at this dump?" he asks, reminding me that there's a reason I wanted to meet him tonight, and it's not just because I crave him in the worst ways.

"I need your help," I say, and his eyebrows go up.

"With what?"

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:18 pm*

### Chapter 12

ELIO

I lean back in my chair and run my thumb absently along the rim of my glass. If I have any hope of getting Orion on board with this, I need to choose my words carefully. The problem is finesse isn't exactly my strong suit.

I tell people what I want, and they do it...

Except for him. I tell Orion what I want, and he calls me a brat and makes me suffer in ways I can't get enough of. Does that make me as spoiled as he says I am? I have no fucking clue.

There aren't a lot of ways to massage this request into something he's likely to find palatable though, so I might as well just dive in headfirst.

"The guy who owns this place." I gesture broadly at the bar around us, keeping my voice low so the bartender is less likely to overhear. I'm not sure if all the kinky, gay flirting that just happened between us made him more or less likely to try to eavesdrop on the rest of the conversation. "He took out a loan to keep this place afloat."

"And he hasn't paid up?" Orion guesses.

"He's paying. Every month, right on time. Some months he's even paying more than the minimum," I answer, and he frowns, glancing around at the completely empty

chairs and barstools, the bartender behind the counter scrolling through his phone with a bored expression, the layer of dust on half the bottles lining the shelves.

“How?”

“Exactly. That’s what I want to find out.”

“Why do you care?” he asks, leaning forward to rest his elbows on the table, then bringing the fresh glass of Scotch to his lips to take a slow sip. “You’re getting your money. Does it really matter where it comes from?”

“That depends.” I shrug. “If he’s earning it beating the shit out of other criminals at underground fights, we don’t mind that so much.” I smirk, and Orion rumbles a laugh. “But if he’s operating an illegal business under our noses without following our rules or giving us our cut of it? Yeah, we give a shit about that.”

He grunts in understanding. “And what does any of this have to do with me? Is this just another lesson in the seedy ecosystem of Wildcliff, or what?”

“I told you; I need your help.” I mirror his posture—elbows on the table, our faces only a few inches apart. “I have to poke around, ask some questions, get to the bottom of what kind of shit Casimir is up to so I can either shake him down or shut it down.”

Orion is quiet for a minute, waiting for me to say more. When I don’t, he lets out a frustrated huff.

“Are you being cryptic just to piss me off? Where exactly do you think I come in here?” he asks again.

“I figured we could play a little ‘good mobster, bad muscle.’ I ask the questions all

nice and understanding, and if they need a little encouragement, you knock them around a bit.” I watch his expression, bracing for him to lose it and go off on me with some platitudes about not wanting to get mixed up in Mafia business. The muscles around his eyes tense and his jaw ticks, but he doesn’t flip the table or tell me to fuck off, so that’s something.

After another beat of silence, he snorts. “If someone doesn’t want to answer your questions, why don’t you just shoot them? Better yet, why chase all around the city trying to threaten answers out of people when you can go to the source and hold a gun to Casimir’s head until he tells you where the money is coming from?”

“First of all, regardless of what you might think about me, I don’t solve all my problems with bullets. Taking someone out is a necessary, messy part of this life, but it doesn’t mean it’s always the best place to start,” I explain calmly. “And second, it’s called leverage, Boss. The more I know about what’s going on before I sit Casimir down for a chat, the better.”

He grunts again. The expression on his face is too neutral for me to guess which way he’s leaning. Time to pull out the ace up my sleeve.

“I know you don’t want your debt hanging over your head anymore. Well, this is how you can work it off.”

His eyes narrow and he leans back in his seat. He looks past me, not like he’s looking at anyone else, but with a faraway expression that suggests he’s thinking things over. I keep my mouth shut to give him some time. Eventually, his eyes flick back to mine, set with hard determination.

“You already paid off my debt. I don’t owe the Morettis anything.” He pauses like he’s waiting for me to contradict him. He’s right, he doesn’t technically owe anything, and I don’t give a shit about collecting anything from him. I figured his



pride over it would be enough to convince him to take me up on the offer. If it's not, I might need to come up with another angle to sell him on helping me. But before I can come up with a new way to convince him, he keeps talking. "I want to get paid for it."

"You..."

"Ten thousand a week," he says firmly.

I open and close my mouth a few times, trying to reconcile the man who didn't want a damn thing to do with this world with the one who's now demanding a fat paycheck to jump in with both feet. The panic in his eyes that I noticed when he walked in flashes through my mind again.

"Everything okay, Boss? Did something happen?"

He flinches and looks away from me again. "Wanting to get paid for selling my soul means something is wrong?" There's a dark amusement in his voice.

"Agreeing to sell your soul without putting up a fight means something is wrong." Pieces of a puzzle I hadn't realized was incomplete start slotting into place in my head. Orion's UFL paycheck should be able to buy him a better apartment than the rathole he's living in. He's risking his career at underground fights, taking out loans from a group of criminals he despises, and still barely getting by. Something tells me that nursing home, Shady Pines, is the piece right in the middle that makes the rest of the puzzle make sense.

"Is it one of your parents?" I guess, and Orion tenses.

He hisses out a venomous laugh. "Am I going into debt for the parents who kicked me out at thirteen years old, leaving me to live on the streets of this lawless city just

because I'm gay? Hard no."

Rage boils in my gut and I make a mental note to have Sparrow look into the whereabouts of Orion's so-called parents. It sounds like they could use a visit.

"Then who?" I ask.

He shifts in his seat and stares across the table at me. Emotions flutter behind his eyes, too quickly to name them all. Anger, hurt, that momentary, desperate panic again, and at least a dozen more that are gone before I can latch onto any of them.

"My brother."

ORION

"Your brother?" Elio repeats, sounding dumbfounded.

I'm not sure why I told him. Anxiety clenches around my chest, a fleeting fear that he's going to find a way to use Jack's injury as some kind of leverage to hold over my head. He wouldn't even need to try. The fresh medical bills that are stacking up right now are doing all the work for him, twisting my arm and forcing me to my knees, a position I resent at the best of times.

"Jack," I supply his name. "There it is. All the upper hand you'll ever need over me. Want me to beat the hell out of someone? Kill them? Want me to lick your fancy Italian Oxfords for a few bucks so I can make sure his hospital bills are covered?" My throat is tight, each word dripping off my tongue bitterly, making Elio's expression darken.

"Forget it," he says, standing up and reaching into his jacket to pull out his wallet. He sets a twenty-dollar bill on the table and then pushes his chair in.

“Forget what?” My chair teeters behind me as I stand up too fast.

“The job. I’ve got soldiers who can play the part of menacing well enough to make it work. If you need the money, I’ll give it to you. But I’m not going to make you knock anybody around to earn it.”

Elio smooths a hand over his suit jacket and starts towards the door. I’m right behind him, my muscles vibrating with tension, my teeth clenched so hard my jaw aches. He steps outside and I grab him by the back of his collar, taking satisfaction in wrinkling the soft, expensive material in my fist as I drag him back. He doesn’t resist or struggle as I shove him up against the building, earning a few fleeting, curious looks from people passing by. In this neighborhood, I guarantee every one of them has seen a hell of a lot worse than this.

“I don’t want your pity money, Brat.” I press my body up against his, pinning him to the wall, holding him up by his lapels.

His pupils widen and his lips part. He darts his tongue out and drags it along the bottom one, drawing my eyes to the motion and stirring heat in the pit of my stomach. It’s been a long fucking day and everything inside of me feels untethered, desperately clawing for control.

“It’s not pity money, Boss,” he murmurs, sagging into me, trusting me with his weight. “I’m not going to hold your brother’s medical bills over your head like that.”

“Would you do it if I were someone else?” I already know the answer. Maybe Elio is right and the Morettis are Godzilla protecting this city from Mothra, but they’re still fucking mobsters.

“Probably,” he admits, and I grunt, shoving him harder up against the building.

“I earn my own way. I’m going to do the job for you, and you’re going to pay me,” I say firmly.

The submissive expression I’ve gotten used to seeing on his face hardens into something defiant. “I’m not the devil, Orion. You see this job as selling your soul, but I’m not in the market for it.”

His insistence is a surprise. He asked me here to convince me to do a job for him, and I’m agreeing. Now he’s trying to talk me out of it? If I didn’t know any better, I might think this bratty mob boss is soft deep down.

I lean in closer, bumping my nose against his, and the rebellion melts away. His lips soften and he lets out a trembling sigh, his cock hardening between us. If there’s one thing life has taught me, it’s that nothing is ever guaranteed. The ground can shift under your feet in the blink of an eye and leave you scrambling to stay upright. Elio’s predictable reaction to me is a counterbalance to the disorder that I didn’t know I needed.

“An underground fight or a criminal off the streets, is there really much difference in who gets roughed up? Hell, it might be the same damn person for all I know. I’m taking the job. We’re done arguing about this.”

He bobbles his head with a nod, knocking his forehead against mine.

“Alright, Boss.”

“Good boy,” I mutter, lunging forward to catch his lips in a hard, biting kiss. I can taste the cheap Scotch in his mouth, and something much sweeter lingering underneath. Just like yesterday, he gives in to the demand of my mouth the same way he’s given in to all of my other rough touches.

Elio's tongue is hot and pliant, vibrating with a sigh as I stroke it with mine. My cock swells and throbs, all the tension from today pooling heavily between my legs and coiling around my muscles.

I break the kiss and he sucks in a ragged breath, his eyes shining in the moonlight and his lips glistening. Hunger gnaws at my insides, along with mounting adrenaline and a desperate need to find a way to control the chaos swirling around me. To be the chaos for just a little while.

"Run, Brat." My voice is full of gravel, and Elio blinks as I let go of him and take a step back without warning. He stumbles, then looks at me like a startled rabbit.

"What?" He rights himself, an excited blush already rising in his cheeks, even though he doesn't seem to understand the game yet.

"Run," I repeat, adding an extra growl of menace this time.

"What happens when you catch me?" he asks, already taking a backward step away from me, towards the alleyway that snakes between a long row of buildings.

"If you don't run fast enough, you'll find out."

### Chapter 13

ELIO

All I can hear is the ragged sound of my own breathing and the crunch of gravel under my Louboutin Oxfords as I sprint down the alleyway. The buildings are too tall to let much light filter into the space between them, other than the stray glow from the few windows that overlook the dumpsters and loading bays. My eyes manage to adjust anyway, pulling in just enough light in the darkness to make out the shape of a scrawny cat that darts out of a trash bin and sprints in the opposite direction.

I can taste the lingering flavor of Orion's mouth on mine, the growl of the word run echoing in my brain—a command, and a threat... The best kind of foreplay. The buildings part and I see the mouth of another street only a handful of yards ahead. My heart is pounding wildly, all my animal instincts telling me to run faster, spurring me away from the danger closing in behind me. It doesn't matter that I want to be caught, that my cock is hard and my balls are heavy, that my skin is tingling and desperate to be marked up with more bruises in the shape of his fingers and teeth. Something primal deep inside my brain ignores all of that, chanting a frantic drumbeat of faster and flee and go, go, go .

I can't hear his footsteps over the rush of blood in my ears, but I know he's close, and getting closer. I know in my bones, even without looking over my shoulder or pausing to listen for him, that Orion is eating up the distance between us with ease. I've never bothered to think much about the pinch of my shoes around my toes or the lack of traction on the smooth soles, meant for clicking impressively against marble floors and polished hardwood, not scrambling down filthy back streets paved with

loose gravel. I've never chased anyone and I've sure as hell never run from anyone, so this is the first time I've had any reason to notice how restrictive a suit is in a situation like this. Orion has the right shoes. He has clothes that move with him instead of wrapping around his limbs to restrain him. I'm running on the adrenaline of a gut-deep fear, while he's spurred on by the thrill of the chase. Hunter and prey, and I'm as desperate to be caught as I am to get away.

I push myself faster, my legs burning with the effort to reach the safe haven of the light up ahead. Cars zoom by and people walk past the gap between the buildings without looking into the darkness. Not just not looking, but actively avoiding turning their heads in my direction. Is it a defense mechanism? Are they afraid of what they might see if they glance down the alleyway? I guess that's how most people survive, by pretending the ugly parts of life don't exist as best they can. I've never had that luxury, and I don't think Orion has either.

I stumble over something. A flattened cardboard box maybe? I can't tell and it doesn't matter. What matters is that in the split second it takes me to catch myself, Orion closes the last few steps between us. His hand clamps down firmly over my mouth, muffling the instinctive, panicked sound that rises in my throat as his other arm snakes around my midsection. He's not a huge man with muscles for days, but after seeing him fight, it's no surprise that he knows exactly how to use his body. He's spent years training, learning how to capitalize on his strengths and overpower someone with ease.

In one swift movement, Orion presses me up against the side of the building, the rough brick biting into my hands when I put them up to brace myself. His body flattens against mine, his chest to my back, both rising and falling with the heavy breaths we gulp down, the hard shape of his erection finding its way into the crease of my ass. Heat radiates off of him, the smell of cheap whiskey and even cheaper soap filling my nose and overpowering the stink of the alley.

I part my lips and flick my tongue against the palm of his hand. He tightens his grip, his fingers biting into my cheek, a growl vibrating against my back. I suck in shallow breaths through my nose, my heart hammering wildly.

“Look what we have here.” His lips brush my earlobe, his hot breath tickling my skin. “A lost brat.” I gasp at the sharp sting of his teeth dragging against my ear and squirm uselessly.

He presses into me harder, pinning me to the wall with nowhere to go and no leverage to fight him off. In this position, I couldn’t even reach my gun if I wanted to. That realization sends an electric thrill down my spine, waking up all my nerve endings with a fresh shot of fear and adrenaline. Orion chuckles, the sound dark and dangerous, punctuated with another sharp bite just below my ear this time.

He scrapes his teeth along the curve of my jaw and grinds his thick erection between my ass cheeks. Even through our clothes, I can feel the heat of it, the eager throb that will flutter and pulse inside me if he’ll just drop the denial bullshit and fuck me.

“Is that what a privileged brat like you is doing in a dark, dangerous alley? Are you looking to get roughed up and fucked?” he murmurs, his low voice full of gravel.

He keeps his hand over my mouth, making it clear he’s not looking for a real answer. Under the guise of the game, it’s easy to pretend he doesn’t care what I want, that he’s going to take whatever he wants regardless. Maybe he’s even convinced himself that’s true. I give in to that filthy fantasy, whimpering and thrashing, putting up a fight to break free and relishing the feeling of his arm tightening around me.

My cock aches and I claw at the wall, the sting of the sharp brick tearing at my palms and fingertips turning everything else up a few more notches. Every humid puff of Orion’s breath on my skin, the sound of traffic and voices only a few feet away, the weight of his arousal crushed into the crease of my ass, the lingering taste of his



tongue on mine. My lungs burn and I thrash again.

None of it does anything to dislodge him though. All I'm accomplishing by resisting him is tiring myself out. I let out a stifled laugh against his palm. He's doing to me exactly what he does in the ring, letting me spend all the adrenaline and fight inside of me while he waits me out. I sag into the wall with another muffled groan, my eyelids fluttering. It feels just as good to give in to the weight of his body and the strength of his hold on me as it did to thrash against it.

"Come on, you're not giving up that easily, are you?" Orion taunts, dragging his tongue along the back of my neck and reaching for my belt. The mockery in his tone is exactly the right amount of degrading, making me feel pathetic and horny. I want to beg him to fuck me and hide my face in shame at the same time. Except he can't see my face, not in the dark, not in this position where I'm pressed against the building.

The metallic clink of my belt buckle sounds unnaturally loud, even over the ragged noise of his breathing right next to my ear. My cock jerks and throbs, and I dig deep to find some more fight in me, flailing and sinking my teeth hard into his palm as he unzips my pants. Orion yelps and then chuckles again, the sound warm and rich, pure sex dripping from every vibrating note.

"That's better," he praises, biting me right back, his teeth sinking sharply into the back of my neck, right where he licked me a few seconds ago. "Make no mistake about it, Brat, I'm going to fuck you. But I don't want you to make it easy. Where's the fun in it if you just spread your cheeks and beg for my cock without any fight?"

The moan that rattles through me comes from deep in my gut. I'm glad his hand is over my mouth, because being told not to beg for it has the exact opposite effect on me. Pleas are right on the tip of my tongue. If I could talk, I would embarrass myself by offering him anything to put his dick inside of me. Money, a fancy car, a nicer

apartment, anything if he'll just fuck me. I buck in vain against him again, desperate to feel him overpower me, eager to give him exactly what he's asking for, and so fucking impatient I want to scream. And, since my mouth is covered, I do just that. I wail into his hand, letting go of the tight coil of control inside of me that keeps me cool and collected at all times, unleashing the wild, animal thing inside of me that just wants to shout and fight and feel without judgment or expectation.

"Fuck, Elio." Orion groans quietly. My name on his lips feels like being tased, my body jerking with an electric jolt. "You're fucking beautiful, and I'm trying to remember to hate you for it." He says it between clenched teeth, even lower than the first sentence. It's like he's talking to himself more than to me, but I hear every word.

He yanks my pants and underwear down around my thighs, leaving me feeling exposed in spite of the shadows shrouding us. He unwinds his arm from around my waist and, in one swift movement, brings his hand down hard against my bare ass. The cracking sound is loud, echoing off of the buildings and reverberating in my ears, and I let out another untethered sound into his palm. The heat of the slap resounds through me, rattling my insides and making my cock jerk.

Something crinkles, and I'm not sure what it is until the cold, slick dribble of lube runs down my crack. I gasp and squirm again, sweat trickling down the back of my neck the same way the lube slithers its way towards my hole.

Orion's fingers follow the same path, starting at the top of my crease and stroking between my ass cheeks, gathering lube on their way to my hole. I'm acutely aware of where we are, of the fact that anyone could come down this alley at any time, and I couldn't possibly care less as long as he just keeps touching me. I grunt and moan into his hand, giving up the ruse of fighting to get away from him in favor of shoving my ass towards him. His fingertips glance over my rim, slippery and warm, just as necessary for my continued survival as my next breath.

“Maybe I’m all wrong about you. I see your expensive clothes and all the nice, shiny shit you own that you don’t even appreciate, and I figure you must be so sold on your own self-importance that you think you’re entitled to play god with other people’s lives.” The familiar well of contempt in his tone sends a hot shiver down my spine as he circles two fingers along the outer edge of my pucker. He presses his lips against the side of my neck, hot and soft, in direct contrast to the simmering anger in his voice. I tremble again. “But now I’m thinking that a guy who will get on his knees in a filthy bathroom and practically beg to be fucked a foot away from a dumpster probably knows that the way he lives his life is some kind of twisted. I think you want to be hurt and humiliated because you’re sick of people tripping over themselves to lick your shoes.”

My eyelids flutter and I curl my fingers against the wall, feeling the biting scrape of the brick on my knuckles this time. The way Orion takes me apart with his words, the effortless way he shines a light into the cobwebbed corners of my psyche makes me feel even more naked than I felt last night, completely bare and tied to his bed. It tweaks my insides and refreshes the urge to struggle, to get closer to him, to get away from him, to distract both of us from how hard he just hit the target.

## ORION

The more Elio flails and whimpers, the more sure I am that I’ve finally figured him out. The fraying knot of hatred that’s lived in my chest since before I met him loosens and falls away. The ragged sound of his breathing and the feel of his body thrashing under me fills up that empty space with something else, something hotter and even more intense than the rage I’ve gotten so used to.

I bite down on the side of his jaw again, flicking the spot with my tongue as I suck a bruise onto his skin. I pet his pucker with two slick fingers, waiting for him to tire himself out again. His hole constricts and relaxes, fluttering against my fingertips with every muffled sound he makes. When he sags into me to catch his breath, I press

my fingers against the tight ring of muscles and shove them both inside.

His hole clamps down around the intrusion. My hand over his mouth is damp with sweat and the condensation of his breath, but I can feel it getting even wetter as he parts his lips and pants. I love the fight in him, not because I'm trying to fulfill a rape fantasy, but because it makes this moment so much fucking sweeter. He's given up pretending to shake me off, and the surrender that's written in his slack muscles and in every stifled, breathy moan is more addictive than any drug.

I work my fingers deeper, loosening him up and savoring the prize I earned after the work of chasing him through the darkness and wearing down his defenses. I stroke in and out of him with deep, slow thrusts, eating up the heady submission of the way he trusts his weight to me and the greedy cant of his hips as he rides my fingers.

Maybe one night I'll tie him to my bed again and finger him until he's sobbing and begging for my cock. Better yet, I'll bind his hands behind his back, put him face down, ass up, and tease his hole with just the tip of my tongue until he's cursing me. But we don't have that kind of time out here in the open, where anyone could stumble upon us at any second.

I slip my fingers free, and he gasps into my palm. He's done struggling though, staying pliant, pinned to the wall by my weight alone while I fumble in my back pocket for the condom I shoved in there on a whim this morning. I tear it open with my teeth and then undo my pants, pushing them down just enough to let my cock spring free.

Even with my hand over his mouth, the muffled sounds Elio is making are unmistakable pleas. I peel my hand back and his whispered, rasping words fill the quiet alley.

"Please, Orion. Boss. Fuck. I need it. I'll do anything. Just, please ." The desperation

in his voice tightens my balls and heats up every inch of my skin.

I grunt and line up the sheathed tip of my cock with his entrance, feeling the soft give of it immediately. His hole is slippery and greedy, pulling me in the same way Elio himself dragged me into his world. Maybe I should still hate him, but that feels impossible with my nose pressed against the back of his neck, my cock sinking into his ass inch by inch, all of his muscles quivering as if he's the helpless one. As if he needs me somehow.

I grit my teeth and suck in a sharp breath, the pressure of his inner muscles squeezing so tightly around my cock that it makes my eyes roll back and my thighs tremble. When I bottom out, we both moan. I suck in a deep, slow breath and let go of the weight of everything else. It may only be for the next few minutes, but right now nothing matters except for the sounds Elio's making and the way his back expands against my chest with every panting breath he drags in.

I grab his wrists and yank his arms up over his head. It's probably wishful thinking, but I swear I can feel the slight swell of the bruises I left there last night. I drag my thumb along the spot and rumble with satisfaction. The thought of my marks marring the pristine skin under his fancy suits is satisfying all on its own, but now I'm imagining Elio stripping himself bare at the end of a long day and seeing the evidence of my rough treatment, feeling tenderness in all the spots where my fingers or teeth bit into him. The thought of giving him exactly what he's craving, of scratching an itch for him even when I'm not there, hits every dominant button inside of me.

I pull back, then snap my hips forward again, jarring him into the wall. He groans and tries to tug his arms free, urging me to tighten my hold on him in fluent brat. I dig my fingers in and fuck him harder, filling him deep over and over, pressing him into the wall and ignoring the way the brick bites into my knuckles. Elio matches my feral, frantic energy, meeting my thrusts and echoing the desperate sounds that vibrate on my tongue. I bite and kiss the patches of bare skin I can reach on his throat,

hungry for the way he gasps every time my teeth dig into him.

Heat builds in my gut, tightening with every thrust, ratcheting up with every layer of civility we let fall away. Elio's pants drop around his ankles, and I grab both his wrists in one hand. I shove my free hand up the back of his loose shirt to drag my blunt fingernails over his skin. I want to scratch my name into him so everyone else will know better than to touch what's mine. I want to sear insults and praise all over his body, so he'll always have whichever one he needs. I want to fucking tear him apart and put him back together.

He moans my name like it's a prayer, his body trembling, his insides constricting around my cock so hard that I see stars.

My thrusts fall out of rhythm, faster and more frenzied, harder, harder, harder, until Elio moans so loudly that I have no doubt people on the sidewalk can hear him. They can gather around and watch me fuck the cum out of him for all I care.

"That's right, come for me, Brat. Be a good boy."

He wails again and starts to pulse around me. I wrap my hand around his cock, catching the hot splatters of his cum, using it as lube to stroke him through his orgasm. It only takes one more thrust for me to follow him over the edge, the tug of his inner muscles around my cock punching the breath out of my lungs as I spill into the condom.

Next time I don't want anything between us. I want to paint his insides and leave my cum dripping from his hole when I'm done with him. I went to the free clinic and got tested weeks ago, before Elio sucked me off in the bathroom, before I had any reason to think there would ever be anything between us. But if I'm being really honest with myself, it's possible I entertained a fantasy or two about hate-fucking the bratty mob boss, even back then.

I slam my hips forward one last time, grinding against his ass cheeks and groaning as I savor the last few dizzying pulses of my fading orgasm. My hand is dripping with his release, his cock already starting to soften in my grasp. I sag against him and press my face into the back of his neck again, loose tendrils of my hair falling around my face.

“I feel like you’ve peeked into all my dirtiest fantasies and handed them to me on the tarnished platter I’ve been craving,” he murmurs, his voice as raw as my insides feel.

“What, no one’s ever fucked you like they hate you before?” I try to keep the question light, but a possessive feeling swells in my chest. If he says someone has, I might have to find whoever it was and rip their head clean off their body for daring to touch him.

“No one has ever seen me the way you do,” Elio says. His response dries up all the words in my throat and soothes the jealousy inside me.

I growl and press my lips to the back of his neck, then slip my spent cock free. I toss the used condom onto the ground a few feet away, into a heap of trash that’s already there, then pull my pants up. Elio keeps his hands braced on the wall, his ass bare, his pants around his ankles. Even in the dark, it’s the kind of sight I could get off to a thousand times and still dream about it.

I crouch down behind him and sink my teeth into his ass cheek. He lets out a tired gasp, pushing his ass towards me, still eager for more. I laugh quietly and grab his pants to pull them back into place. His breathing slows as I tuck his cock away, zip him up, and redo his belt. When I stand up again, he finally lowers his hands from the wall and turns to face me.

“Let me drive you home?” he offers.

I nod, then catch his jaw in one hand, leaning in close enough to feel his breath and the humidity radiating off of his sweat-slicked skin.

“Thanks, Brat,” I murmur, catching his lips in a kiss.

It feels different without the desperate, hungry edge of lust riding us both hard. I take a minute to relish the soft give of his mouth and the sweetness of his tongue wrapping around mine. I peeled back a layer of Elio tonight, but I’m sure I’ve only scratched the surface. He’s a mess of contradictions, his morals dark, light, and dozens of shades of gray. He’s cocky and self-assured, but desperate to be used and humiliated. He wants to pull me into his world, but he doesn’t want to force my hand. He’s a stone-cold killer—I saw it with my own two eyes last night—but right now he’s clinging to my shirt and melting into my mouth with a sweet submissiveness that makes me ache.

“Actually, you might as well just drop me back at the hospital,” I say when I release him. Elio frowns, but he doesn’t press me with any more questions about my brother. At least not tonight. Will I tell him if he asks later?

Honestly, I have no fucking clue.

What I do know is that Elio is a complication I don’t fucking need on top of everything else. But I think it might already be too late.



### Chapter 14

#### ORION

There's something meditative about the moments right before a fight. It's like everything else gets turned down and all my senses crystallize. I'm able to focus on the moment and the space I'm occupying. It's the same thing that happens when I get my hands on Elio, the whole world blotted out around me so I can zero in on what's in front of me.

Memories of Elio's moans and the ghost of his skin under my fingertips are the last things I need to be thinking about right now. But it's harder to shake off the thoughts than it should be. Even with the grounding smell of sweat and blood in the air, and the white noise of the crowd roaring just outside the tunnel, I'm not as focused as I should be.

Thoughts of the Mafia underboss aren't the only thing messing with my Zen tonight though. I close my eyes and roll my head one way, then the other, stretching the muscles along the back of my neck and drawing in deep, calming breaths through my nose. The kind of calming breaths that don't rattle or hurt. Breaths that don't require a ventilator. Unlike the breaths Jack is taking tonight, still stuck in that hospital bed after three days without any improvement so far. And I've been pretty much living in the too-hard chair at his bedside just as long.

All the cues that it's almost time to fight have my heart rate up and my senses dialed in, my muscles twitching expectantly, adrenaline giving me energy I haven't had in days. I open my eyes and bounce on my toes, warming up with a few jabs at the air.

But underneath it, I can still feel the bone-deep weariness from too few hours of sleep and a steady diet of hospital food. Tonight might be my first loss in an official UFL fight, and I'm too exhausted to even care the way I should.

I care , but compared to other shit, winning or losing tonight feels more trivial than it ever has. Or maybe I just want to convince myself it's trivial, because there's a staggering amount of pressure in accepting that if I slip off the top of my game, then the UFL checks dry up. I'm already older than anybody else in the sport, past my prime if you listen to the announcers and sports reporters. And if they're saying that bullshit when I'm still undefeated, I don't want to imagine the headlines if and when I finally go down.

My trainer, Terry, pats me on the shoulder, jarring me out of my thoughts with a wordless reminder that it's time to shake it all off and go do the one thing I know how to do. Make someone hurt.

"You good, Barros?" he checks, giving me a little nudge and following me down the tunnel.

I grunt around the mouthguard shoved between my teeth and nod. I'm as good as I'm going to get, anyway. And even if I weren't, the walk down the tunnel to the ring isn't the time to spill my personal struggles to him. He knows about Jack. He trained Jack and was almost as devastated as I was when he ended up paralyzed. Poor fucker ended up stuck with the less charismatic of the two of us, and had to say goodbye to his dream of earning a cut of the sweet sponsorship checks Jack was sure to bring in. I know that's not the only reason Terry gave a fuck, but sometimes it's easier to let myself be cynical and bitter about it.

As soon as my feet hit the mat, my eyes snap to the crowd. I don't even have to try to seek out Elio among the masses. He's right there, front and center, exactly where I expected him to be. My lips twitch with a smirk at the eager way he's sitting on the

edge of his seat, his expression ravenous.

The bell rings and I jerk my attention to the man in front of me for the first time. My opponent, Greg Nelson, a scrappy up-and-comer who's been making waves for months now. If he lays me out tonight, it's going to put him on the map. Add in his winning smile and the way he's been eating up the limelight lately, and he'll be plastered all over cereal boxes and commercials for athletic gear in no time. It almost makes the thought of losing bearable.

Almost .

Now that I'm standing here under the bright lights with the cheers from the crowd throbbing in my ears, I want to win. I want to wipe the cocky grin off of Greg's face and make him give his post-fight interview with a fat lip. I want the press to have to twist themselves into pretzels trying to justify suggesting that I retire when I still haven't lost a fight.

I wait for him to make his first move, tracking every twitch of his muscles and shift of his weight, but for at least five seconds he doesn't move. Five seconds is an eternity in MMA. Five seconds is enough time to knock someone's head clean off their shoulders. It's enough time to win or lose a fight.

His eyes dart into the crowd, and I'm not sure who he's looking at, or if he's trying to figure out who I was looking at. Either way, the half-second distraction is long enough to convince me to throw out my usual playbook and strike first. I knock Nelson back with a right hook to the jaw, but he recovers quickly and gets his head back in the fight. He comes back swinging, and the arena fades into nothing more than background noise as we trade blows.

I'm slower than usual, taking more damage than I would on a typical night. But even the points he does manage to rack up on me feel like they're only half heat. Why the

hell would he bother to pull his punches though? The question settles into the back of my mind, not important enough to worry about right now. Maybe he's not going easy on me. Maybe he's just having an off night too.

I knock him off of his feet with an uppercut. He tries to kick my legs out from under me on his way down, but I've studied his fights and I'm expecting the move. I don't give him a chance to bounce back up before I'm on him, pinning him down. Greg doesn't give up without a tussle and a few more body blows, but eventually he taps out and I'm hauled off of him, panting for breath as I spit out my mouthguard along with a mouthful of blood.

I even manage to smile for a change in the post-fight interview. Of course, I leave my mouth bloody when I do, just to see the way the reporters squirm. Shit like that is exactly why I'll never be the star I should have been, regardless of my win record. My life would be easier if I could play nice, but I just can't live with the hypocrisy. These people show up to salivate over our violence and then cringe over a little bit of blood when all is said and done. They don't like the ugly side of life? Well, join the fucking club.

It doesn't take long before they all clear out, leaving me alone in the locker room with my ears ringing from the sudden silence. My eyelids droop and my shoulders sag with a renewed wave of exhaustion that's right on the heels of the fading surge of adrenaline. I grab a fresh towel and wipe the sweat and blood off of my face. I can feel myself moving at half speed, my limbs heavy like I'm moving through molasses.

The sound of the locker room door opening behind me isn't a surprise, and I don't have to look over my shoulder to know who it is. My lips spasm with another smirk. The motion splits open the small cut, filling my mouth with the salty iron flavor of blood all over again. I bring the towel to my mouth and dab at the flow, tracking the click of Elio's shoes across the linoleum floor one step at a time. He doesn't say a word as he approaches, but I can hear the uptick of his breathing as he gets closer.

“You planning to lurk back there until I give you a formal invitation or what, Brat?” I ask in a low rumble, hiding the smile in my voice.

He chuckles, and it’s startling how familiar the carefree sound is. I’ve barely started to accept that Elio might not be as evil as I thought. Meanwhile, some primal, caveman part of my brain has already decided to memorize the warm vibration of his laughter and claim it as something that belongs to me. Even entertaining the idea that any sound he makes is something I could own fills me with a deep sense of satisfaction.

“Not sure yet, Boss. I was actually trying to decide whether I wanted to wind you up or give you a break for a change,” he confesses.

I snort and toss the towel onto the nearby bench before turning around to take him in. He looks the same as always, his hair neatly styled, expensive suit fitted and unwrinkled. It’s the way he always looks before I get my hands on him, anyway. Before I leave him rumpled and used with a sated smile on his face. There’s a fading bruise on his jaw, right below his ear that makes me want to beat my chest and bite him again to leave a fresh mark before this one has a chance to disappear completely.

Elio steps over the bench, stopping right in front of me. I reach for him, a twinge in my shoulder making me groan through my teeth.

His eyebrows pull together, and he looks me up and down. “You okay, Boss?” A flicker of fire and rage passes through his eyes. “Did Nelson hurt you?”

I roll my eyes. “It was a fight, genius. Hurting each other is the whole point.”

He scoffs and reaches up to drag his thumb along the side of my mouth, pulling it back with a smear of crimson across the pad. Unlike the reporters, he doesn’t flinch. Why would he? As many criticisms as I’ve managed to come up with for Elio, he’s

never been a hypocrite like everyone else. He licks my blood off of his thumb without a second thought and then tilts his chin up, like he's expecting a kiss, hoping for one, but he's leaving the decision up to me.

After three days of hell and stress, he somehow managed to figure out exactly what I need to feel like I'm on steady ground. An emotion I don't bother trying to name swells in my chest, and I grab him by the tie to pull him into a kiss. The flavor of blood is still lingering on my tongue, but it doesn't seem to bother him. Elio parts his lips for me and sighs into my mouth, his cock slowly swelling against me as I stroke his tongue with mine, coaxing him into a tangle of heavy breathing and roaming hands.

My dick reacts the same way his does, getting hard and heavy as I devour his lips. But fatigue is catching up with me fast, and I end up leaning on him the way he typically melts into me. Elio breaks the kiss and drags his tongue over his damp bottom lip, his face still close to mine, our noses bumping.

"You sure you're alright, Boss?"

"I'll live," I assure him. "But you could probably talk me into killing a man with my bare hands in exchange for a hot bath and a comfortable bed." I huff a laugh so he knows I'm not serious. I probably shouldn't put ideas like that in his head, actually. Fuck knows he might just ask me to do it.

"Well, shit. Forget the plan for tonight then. We can do that instead," he says.

"Did we have a plan for tonight?" I remember Elio's suggestion that we hit up a bar and rattle some cages after the fight tonight before I've even finished asking the question. "Dammit," I mutter.

"Don't worry about it. One more night won't be the end of the world. Whatever

illegal shit Casimir is up to, he'll still be up to it tomorrow." He shrugs.

I release my hold on him and scrub my hands over my face, dragging in a deep breath and convincing my tired body to rally.

"No, let's get it over with." The sooner we get started, the sooner I get paid. Besides, I would rather get this over with. Maybe Elio isn't what I thought he was, but working for the Morettis isn't exactly something I relish.

He studies my face for a few seconds, and I can tell he's about to argue. I bare my teeth and put a hand over his mouth before he can ask if I'm sure again, or worse, try to insist that he knows better than I do what my body and mind can handle.

"Let me get dressed and we'll go. Be a good brat and go have a seat so you won't distract me." I leave my hand over his mouth until I see the argument drain from his expression.

I put both hands on his shoulders and spin him around, then give him a patronizing pat on the ass to send him on his way. He doesn't protest, but I'm pretty sure I hear him mutter the words "stubborn ass" on his way out of the locker room.

I grin, imagining how I'll punish him for that later. If he wants a stubborn ass, he'll get one.

ELIO

Death it isn't meant to unsettle anyone. A real damn smile feels better than I thought it would.

### Chapter 15

#### ORION

The last time I came to Elio's place, I was too focused on tearing into him about paying off my debt to notice much of anything else. My palm tingles with the memory of putting him over my knee and spanking him until he came. He quirks his lips in a half smile, giving me a sideways look that makes me wonder if he's thinking about the same thing I am as he presses the button to call the elevator to the lobby.

I take a second to look around while we wait for it, drinking in the sleek design of the entryway and the polished gleam of the floors. There isn't a rat trap in sight. No peeling paint or lingering smell of mold either. Shame starts to twist in my gut, but I harden myself against it before it can put down any roots. My apartment might be a shithole, but I worked fucking hard for it. While Elio was stepping into a ready-made family business, I was scrounging through dumpsters behind restaurants for food. The fact that I've managed to put a roof over my head and keep it there through everything else life has thrown at me is a goddamn miracle.

The elevator doors slide open, and I follow Elio inside. As soon as they close again, he sags against the back wall, reaching up to loosen his tie and letting out a sigh that echoes the exhaustion that's weighing me down. Maybe he's never had to fight a stray dog for some stale bread, but his life has probably been bleak in its own ways. That realization slaps me in the face and leeches out just a little bit more of the bitterness I've spent years building up inside of myself.

He surprises me by grabbing my hand when the doors open again. Not in a rough or



demanding way, just threading his fingers between mine. My heart forces its way into my throat and I look down at our joined hands, dumbfounded.

“What? No one’s ever held your hand before?” he teases, reaching into his pocket with his free hand to pull out his key.

I swallow and shake my head, flexing my fingers around his, testing out the weight of his palm against mine and the heavy, slow thud of my heart.

His mouth twists into a sympathetic frown. “Want me to stop?”

Do I want him to stop? Every minute of my life since the first time he came to the locker room after a fight over a year ago has felt like a train that’s jumped the tracks. Out of control, on a path towards certain death, and impossible to stop. It’s also been thrilling, eye-opening, and exactly what I didn’t know I needed in some perfectly twisted way.

I shake my head again. “No, Brat. Just open the door. You promised me massaging jets and bubbles.” I tighten my grip on his hand and jerk my chin at the door in front of us.

He chuckles and slides his key into the lock. Just one lock. No extra deadbolts or anything else. Damn, would that be nice. I don’t even know where the money to pay for Jack’s care is going to come from once I’m too old to keep fighting, so an apartment upgrade is a pipe dream if there ever was one.

He stops inside the door, dropping my hand and bending down to untie his shoes. He slips them off one at a time and lines them up on a shoe rack against the wall. I don’t know if he’s going for some kind of world record on shock value tonight or what, but Elio manages to stun me again by kneeling down in front of me and working the knots in my ratty shoelaces loose. I look down at him, in his tailored suit, his head

bent forward. There's a cluster of dark freckles on the back of his neck, and another fading bruise peeking out from under his collar. I reach down and run my fingertips along the patch of skin.

"You're being sweet tonight." My voice sounds slow and relaxed in my ears, and that's just as shocking as everything else so far.

He pulls my shoe off and glances up at me with a cheeky smirk. "You're giving me a chance to be sweet for a change."

I puzzle over that while he slips my other shoe off and places them next to his on the rack. The sight of my worn sneakers next to his pristine Oxfords is fucking laughable. He gets back to his feet and brushes off his pants, meeting my eyes. I study him silently for a few seconds.

"I thought pissing me off was your kink." I take a step closer and unbutton his suit jacket, slipping my hands under it to slide it off his shoulders.

"It is." He grins again. "But I'm a complex man." He presses a kiss to my cheek, his lips searing my skin before he pulls away and starts down the hallway.

I'm right behind him as we pass through the living room. I pause for a second to take it all in, just like I did down in the lobby. His place is tidy, and every piece of furniture looks expensive and probably custom made. It's the art on the walls that surprises me the most—abstract shapes and pops of color that draw my eye from one to the next until we reach the bathroom.

If I tried to imagine the nicest bathroom possible, it would be a dump compared to what I'm looking at right now. The floor is white marble, but all the other fixtures are matte black—the sinks, the toilet, and even the tub, which I'm pretty sure is big enough to double as an Olympic swimming pool. The shower is made of natural

looking stone with tropical plants growing along the back wall.

“Oh, fuck off,” I mutter in disbelief.

Elio laughs. “You like it?”

“It’s fucking obscene.” I’m sure he can hear the awe in my voice, but it’s also hard not to think about where the money for a bathroom like this came from. “You ever think about what you had to do to afford all this?”

He looks around and then shrugs one shoulder. “Every dollar that’s changed hands since the beginning of human civilization has been soaked in blood, Boss. Face it, we’re a shitty, violent species.”

I guess his logic is hard to argue with. And I’m desperate enough to soak my muscles that I’d rather not overthink it. Maybe that makes me no different from him.

He cranks on the faucet to start filling the tub. While I strip my shirt over my head and step out of my pants, he adds some concoction to the tub, creating bubbles and filling the air with an expensive smelling citrus scent. He finishes and stands next to the tub, stuffing his hands into his pockets and dragging his eyes up and down my naked body like he can’t decide where he wants to look the most.

My cock swells lazily and a steady, pulsing heat fills my gut. If I weren’t dead on my feet, I might be tempted to bend Elio over the sink and make him scream my name until his throat is raw.

“The control for the jets is just...” He jerks his chin towards a dial on the wall next to the tub, then glances at the door like he’s not sure whether he should stay or not.

I’ve been into power play and kink as long as I can remember. When I had time,

before Jack's injury, I spent a fair amount of time at a kink club where I played with all kinds of eager subs. They were fun in their own ways, but they didn't do a damn thing to prepare me for the primal satisfaction I feel having Elio in front of me, shifting his weight and softening his gaze. Half an hour ago, he was the scariest fucker in a bar full of criminals, and now he's waiting for me to tell him what I want.

"Good. Then turn them on and strip. I think there's plenty of room for two in here." I step over the ledge of the tub, groaning as the steaming water envelops my tight calves. "Hell, there's probably room for ten in here."

Elio growls and turns the dial, making the jets rumble to life. "No way am I sharing you with eight other people. If anyone else touches you, I might start hacking off limbs."

I laugh and sink into the water. I should probably be horrified by the unhinged threat, especially considering how comfortable he is with dismemberment and murder as part of his day-to-day life. But, if I'm being honest, I might fucking kill anyone who touches him too.

ELIO

Orion melts into the tub with a moan that settles under my skin and strokes my cock to full mast in seconds flat. He tilts his head back and his eyelids flutter closed, all the tension slipping out of his face. Even the muscle in his jaw that always seems to twitch and tick softens, letting his mouth relax and his lips part a fraction of an inch. I want to slip my tongue between them and get drunk on the taste of his mouth.

I'm not sure if he thought I was joking, but I would fucking kill for him. I'd happily burn this entire city to ash without a second thought if he wanted or needed me to.

"I think I told you to do something," he reminds me without opening his eyes. The

rumble of his voice is as relaxed as the rest of his body language, but that doesn't undermine the authority of the command. The easy, confident dominance is enough to make me pant and my cock jerk.

He teased a few minutes ago that he thought pissing him off was my kink. And fuck me, it is. That spark of passion and rage in his eyes, the rough feeling of his hands all over me, the strange power there is in being the outlet for all the seething fury inside of him... It's the definition of my kink, but it's so much more than that.

I want to piss him off and I want to be the person who calms him down. I want to see the violence shining in his eyes, and I want to watch it bleed out into sated quiet. I want him pushing me up against a building in a filthy alley, fucking me until I can't stand straight, and I want to sink into the bath with him and massage the tense knots out of his shoulders.

I want him .

Orion Barros is my fucking kink.

He cracks an eye open, his throat vibrating with a low warning growl. If I keep standing here instead of undressing, will he jump out of the tub and make me undress? My cock throbs at the thought of Orion, dripping wet, his eyes glowing with frustration as he tears my clothes off me. If he wasn't so tired tonight, I might push my luck.

The satisfied hum he makes when I start to undress sounds like a purr. All the rumbling, wordless sounds he uses to communicate are full of the same feral energy he exudes when he's in the ring. It's like he's just barely holding on to the tether of his humanity, hovering closer to the animal end of the spectrum than the rest of us are. And, yeah, that's definitely my kink too.

I can feel him watching me through the slits of his eyelids, the gurgle of the jets covering the sound of my breathing as I disrobe one item at a time. I toss my clothes into the hamper to be taken to the cleaners later, then turn my back to him so I can set my pistol and holster on the counter next to the sink. I look into the mirror and find him watching me openly now, an unmistakable look of appreciation on his face that sparks electricity up and down my spine.

My balls tighten and an eager shiver runs through me. Orion's eyes meet mine in the mirror, and they darken with a heady mixture of lust and dominance.

"I'm tired of you making me wait, Brat. Get over here."

I let a slow grin spread over my lips, dragging out the moment for just a second so I can watch his expression start to harden. "Yes, Boss," I answer, and turn back towards him.

His eyes follow the sway of my erection between my thighs for the few steps it takes me to reach the bath. It's in that same lazy, unimpressed way he drove me wild when he had me tied to his bed. I don't know if it's the lighting, or if it's exhaustion that lets the mask slip just long enough for me to see hunger bleeding through his expression. Surprisingly, that only makes me hotter for him. I wasn't sure if this game would do as much for me if there wasn't genuine disdain behind it, but the results are in, and it's a big 'hell, yes.'

I absently graze my fingertips over the sensitive head of my cock, gathering the slick precum that's pooled there, and I step into the tub. Orion bats my hand away from my dick.

"Hands off," he barks, then he points at the space in front of himself. "Right here. Facing me."

I'm careful not to trip over his outstretched legs, hidden under the blanket of thick bubbles that cover the surface of the water.

"Bossy," I mutter teasingly as I lower myself right where he wants me, straddling his thighs, my cock bumping against his under the water.

He's just as hard as I am. Thick and stiff, the head of his erection dragging against mine with the jerk of his hips.

"That's what you're here for, isn't it?" He arches an eyebrow. "You brought me home to your fancy-ass apartment full of overpriced shit so I could boss you around and give you a break from your demons by letting you play with mine for a few hours."

"No." I shake my head.

"No?" he scoffs.

"Fine, yes . But that's not the only reason." I shift closer to him, finding a comfortable position with his hard thighs under my ass cheeks, draping myself over him to crush our cocks between us, chest to chest, our faces inches apart.

I reach up and loosen the knot on top of his head, letting his long hair cascade over his shoulders and skim the surface of the bubbles.

"What are the other reasons?" He wraps his arms around me and slides his hands down my back, all the way to my ass. He grabs my cheeks in both hands and squeezes them roughly, tugging them apart just enough to make my hole ache.

"You deserve a hot bath after a hard few days."

Orion's forehead wrinkles and he looks at me like I'm an alien, or maybe like he can't quite figure out what my words mean. Jesus, he's really never had anyone be nice to him in his life, has he?

"That it?" he asks. "You wanted to bathe me?"

I snort and lean in a little closer, dropping my voice to a whisper. "Mostly, I just like your company, Boss."

He grunts and squeezes my ass cheeks again, digging his fingers into my flesh hard enough to make me gasp and make my cock flex against his. I groan and swivel my hips, grinding, humping, tempting him to grab me even harder. Which is exactly what he does. I can feel the throb of bruises forming in the shape of his fingers as I rest my forehead on his and moan.

"I'm too damn tired for games tonight, Brat." Orion sighs. I try to hide my disappointment as he loosens his grip on me and leans back, spreading his arms over the edge of the tub. "Why don't you make yourself useful and jerk us off, nice and slow."

"I thought you said, 'hands off?'" I flash a teasing, toothy smile and slide my hands along his stomach, hot and slippery under the water, tracing the shape of each of his abs. His cock twitches eagerly as I get closer to it.

Even tired and relaxed like this, he's still able to move fast enough that I don't have time to react before his fingers dig into my jaw.

"And now I'm telling you to wrap your hand around both our cocks and stroke us off. Keep up with the attitude and you can make me come and go to bed with blue balls yourself." He follows up the threat by sinking his teeth into my bottom lip, tugging at it sharply before he runs his tongue along it. I gasp, and Orion shoves his tongue into



my mouth.

My pulse skyrockets, and I make another muffled, horny sound against his lips. I've played with a few Doms before, trying to scratch the itch that vanilla sex never seemed to satisfy. There's a hell of a lot that sets Orion apart from any of them, but the way he kisses is at the top of the list. He doesn't just drag his tongue over mine. He doesn't just command my mouth with his. He fucking devours me. He owns me with every stroke and lick. The dominance that colors every other touch is so damn potent in the kiss that it makes me dizzy.

I give in to every one of his unspoken demands, softening for him and following his lead, chasing his tongue when he coaxes me to. The rhythm is just as leisurely as everything else feels tonight, but the force is bruising and addictive.

His moan vibrates around my tongue when I wrap my hand around our cocks, hard, pulsing shaft to hard, pulsing shaft. It's the first time he's let me explore at all, and I'm happy to take full advantage of it, using my free hand to trace the hard planes of his body from his chest to his shoulders. I tangle my fingers in his untamed hair, then find my way to the thundering pulse point in his throat, lingering with my palm against it for a few seconds before I find other interesting places to map out.

Under the water, I work my other hand over our cocks. I tease my thumb along his loose foreskin, pulling it up over the head of his cock, then rolling it back on the downstroke. My foreskin does the same, getting slick inside with precum that washes away when I pull it back with the next stroke. His balls bounce, and my thighs tremble with the dizzying feeling of his cock throbbing against mine.

Orion grunts and growls, not touching me anywhere except for the hold he still has on my jaw, directing the kiss, which gets deeper and harder with every rasping breath and tug of our cocks. The metallic flavor of his blood is still lingering on his lips, almost too faint to notice, but enough to remind me of the look in his eyes during the

fight tonight. He was beautiful and savage. He was fucking perfection.

Heat blooms in my gut and I stroke us faster, jerking my hips to match the rhythm. I flick the pad of my thumb over the stiff nub of his nipple, swallowing the moan he feeds me, and rut my cock against his inside the tight channel of my grasp. Orion grips my face harder and breaks the kiss.

“I said slow ,” he reminds me, his voice full of gravel.

I twist my wrist on the next upstroke, and he lets his head loll back, another groan slipping from between his lips to echo off the bathroom walls this time. His mouth is damp and swollen from our kiss, and I’m sure mine looks the same. My cock pulses greedily at the thought. I want more of his bruises on me. I want him to leave hickies across my throat that spell out his name.

Orion slams his hips up, fucking his cock against mine once, twice. I can feel him getting harder and hear his breath coming faster. With a wicked grin, I do as he said and slow my strokes to a near halt. He moans again and huffs out a laugh. His eyelids flutter half closed, and his puffy lips curl into a smile that’s so goddamn beautiful it punches the air out of my lungs for a second.

I tug my hand up and down over our shafts so slowly I can feel the throb of his veins against mine, both of us spilling so much precum that our heads are slick as they drag over each other, even under the water. His chest expands with deep, steady breaths, and I run my fingers over his lips to commit the shape of his lazy smile to memory.

“Is that better, Boss?” I ask with just a hint of cheekiness, following his lead and breathing in slowly with every steady stroke.

The deliberate pace makes every tug more intense. I can feel the way his balls are tightening little by little and the bunch of his foreskin against mine.

“Yeah,” Orion grunts. “Keep it up, just like that.”

He hooks his hand around the back of my neck and drags me in for another kiss. This time, he matches the unhurried speed of my strokes with languid laps of his tongue along mine. The whole world feels like it slows to a crawl around us. Every droplet of water that creeps down my skin does so at half speed, every breath drawn out, every touch rippling between us like rings on the surface of a pond.

It’s the complete opposite of the frantic way he shoved me up against the wall and fucked me the last time we were together, but that doesn’t make it any less intense. His cock swells and twitches, and mine does the same. We trade stifled, horny sounds around tongue-heavy kisses until my head is so foggy that nothing feels real except the wet slide of his skin against mine.

“Elio,” he rasps my name through gritted teeth and then bites out a groan.

The first pulse of his orgasm fluttering against my cock sends me tumbling over the edge right along with him. I moan into his mouth, no longer kissing but sharing space, trading air and bumping together as our slow breaths turn to heavy panting. I squeeze and tug our cocks, grinding myself against him, chasing every lazy wave of pleasure that crashes over us. One gasping, dizzying throb after another, spilling cum all over each other’s cocks and into my hand. It goes on and on, seemingly endless, until my balls are drained and sore, and my oversensitive cock starts to soften in my grasp.

Orion shivers and his body relaxes under me.

The orgasm made me bold and maybe a little stupid. That’s my excuse for the next words out of my mouth, anyway.

“You know, I’ve got a pretty damn nice bed, too.”

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:18 pm*

### Chapter 16

#### ORION

My cock is still tingling, and my limbs feel heavy. Elio's weight on top of me and the hot, citrusy water engulfing me are almost enough to put me right to sleep after too many nights spent wide awake.

I chuckle and drag my hand from the back of his neck down his spine in a slow stroke, feeling too lazy to even fight with my heavy eyelids.

"Not sure I have it in me to get it up again tonight," I say.

He snorts. "I meant sleep , Boss. In case you didn't know, that's another thing you can do in a bed."

I slide my hand lower and pinch his ass hard. Elio yelps, then laughs.

"Smartass," I mutter. "I can't stay. I have to go back to the hospital."

"You sure?" He shifts his weight and sits up a little more. "Jack is probably sleeping, right? And I'm sure he has doctors and nurses keeping a close eye on him. You won't be much use to him if you keel over from exhaustion." I hate to admit it, but his reasoning is sound. It doesn't help that he starts to massage my shoulders and the back of my neck. Even at an awkward angle, I moan at the way he's able to melt some of the more persistent knots. "Stay here, get some sleep, and I'll drive you over there first thing in the morning."

I know that sitting awake next to Jack's bed doesn't do a damn thing to help him. It just feels wrong to be at home, asleep while he's on a ventilator. But Elio's right. He won't miss me one night. If anything, he'll probably be glad when I show up in the morning and I don't look like an extra in a zombie movie.

"Okay," I agree with a groan.

Elio probes his fingers into a particularly stubborn knot near my left shoulder blade and brings his lips close to my ear.

"Good boy," he whispers, brushing his mouth against my earlobe as he forms the words. The amusement in his voice is as warm as the bathwater.

I pinch his ass again and rumble a laugh. "Watch it, Brat."

"Yes, Boss," he says obediently, kissing my cheek.

We fall into a peaceful silence for a while after that, enjoying the massage jets and the heat of the water. Elio can't seem to stop touching me, alternating between working his magic on my sore muscles and exploring my naked body slowly with his hands. He buries his face in the crook of my neck and brushes leisurely kisses over my Adam's apple and the spot where my pulse flutters.

"I think this is my favorite moment of all time," I admit in a tired drawl that sounds half drunk.

My eyes are closed, but I can feel Elio's mouth curve into a smile against my skin. "Shucks, Boss," he murmurs. "Now who's being sweet?"

"Don't let it go to your head. There isn't a lot of competition. And definitely don't get used to the sweet thing. You've just got all my defenses down with this bubble bath

and a massage.”

“Good. I like your rough edges too much to want them smoothed all the way out. Just because you like me now, doesn’t mean I want you to stop acting like you hate me a little.” He kisses my throat again, flicking his tongue lightly over my skin.

“Who says I like you?” I quirk an eyebrow without opening my eyes.

He drags his lips slowly up to my chin, planting kisses every inch along the way.

“You like me,” he says confidently, placing the last kiss against my mouth.

My stomach flutters and my heart beats just a little faster. I dig my fingers harder into his ass cheek and take a deep breath that fills my lungs with the citrus smell of the bath and the even stronger scent that’s all Elio. Maybe I like him... a little, anyway.

ELIO

“Hello?” The quiet rasp of Orion’s voice drags me awake.

It’s pitch dark, clearly still the middle of the night. The light from the streetlamps and nearby buildings seeps in through the small gap in my bedroom curtains, casting a dim glow over Orion’s naked body. His hair is a tangled mess, hanging loose around his shoulders, and he’s sitting up with the blankets pooled around his waist.

I grumble with irritation and reach for him. Who the fuck is calling in the middle of the night? Whoever it is, they clearly have a death wish. I need at least a few more hours with Orion spooned around me, swallowed up by my cloud-like mattress and silk-soft sheets.

“Shit,” he mutters. The quiet expletive shakes the sleep fog from my brain and has me bolting upright instantly. “Okay, thanks for calling. I’ll be there soon.”

He hangs up and drops his phone on the bed, bringing both hands up to his face. He hisses another curse before flinging the sheets back and getting out of bed.

“What happened?” I’m already scrambling out after him. “Is Jack okay?”

“Not exactly. I don’t know.” He turns his head one way, then the other, looking around in the dark. “Fuck,” he shouts the word this time.

I can feel the loose threads that hold him together fraying. He’s been dealing with the weight of all this alone for too long, but he’s not alone anymore. I mentally pull myself together, slipping easily into the familiar position of control that I may not love, but that Orion needs right now.

I stride across the room and flip on the light. He blinks and squints, not even pausing his fruitless search of the floor to let his eyes adjust. I yank open the top drawer of my dresser and grab two pairs of briefs, stepping into one of them and tossing the other to him. He catches the underwear without even looking, his finely honed reflexes working even when he’s half asleep and fully panicking.

“Put those on,” I say firmly.

His lips twist into a frown, but he does as I say, his movements jerky and robotic as he steps into them. I hand him a pair of jeans next, and finally a t-shirt. He puts them on, then pulls his hair up into a knot while I get dressed in a hurry.

“I need to call a cab. Do cabs run this time of night?”

“You don’t need a cab.” I put a hand on his shoulder and steer him towards the bedroom door.

“I have to get to the hospital,” he argues, picking up his pace when he realizes we’re

heading towards the front door.

When we reach it, he goes for the handle, but I grab a fistful of his t-shirt and tug him to a stop.

“Shoes,” I say, not bothering to respond to his comment about the hospital. Obviously, that’s where we’re going. And no way am I going to stick him in a cab and leave him to deal with whatever’s happening alone. But I don’t think any of that information is going to get through to him right now, so I stay focused on action.

I let go of his shirt and drop to my knees, reaching for his tennis shoes on the rack at the same time. It takes a little coaxing to get him to lift his foot so I can help him get them on, but eventually I manage it. As ridiculous as I look wearing my Oxfords with a pair of sweatpants and blatant bedhead, I can’t remember where I left my other shoes right now, so they’ll have to do. I stand up and shove my feet into my own shoes, then grab my keys and nudge Orion out the door.

By the time I get him into my car, he seems to be thinking a little more clearly again. He rolls down his window and drums his fingers impatiently against the door.

“That was Jack’s doctor. He said something about a thoro-something-or-other. Dammit, I hate when they use that bullshit medical jargon.” He looks out the window, almost sounding like he’s talking to himself.

“They need to drain fluid from his lungs?” I guess without having enough context to know if I’m even in the ballpark or not.

“Is that what that means? Yeah, I guess that makes sense. He has pneumonia and they’ve got him on antibiotics, but I guess they’re not working.” He bounces his knee.



I peel one hand off of the steering wheel and reach over to put it on his thigh. He stills at my touch, letting out a few shaky breaths before putting a hand over mine.

“Do you know anything else so far?” I ask.

Orion gives a jerky shake of his head that I catch out of the corner of my eye, trying to keep my focus on the quiet street stretched out in front of me.

“Just that the last time he was sick like this, the doctor kept making a point of telling me that pneumonia is the leading cause of death in quadriplegics. I just wanted to grab the guy and fucking shake him. Stop fucking trying to prepare me for the worst and do your goddamn job, you know?” His voice cracks.

I squeeze his thigh and turn at the next traffic light. “Sometimes a little intimidation helps.” My lips twitch, and he huffs.

“You’re such a fucking mobster,” he mutters. There’s enough amusement lacing his voice that I don’t think it’s an insult this time.

“Guilty,” I agree, pulling into the hospital parking lot and coming to a stop. “And you’re about to see why that’s not always the worst thing.”

I kill the engine and open my door. Orion eyes me warily for a second, then gets out on his side.

There’s something unsettling about hospitals, and I don’t just mean the life and death aspect of it all. There’s no real sense of time under the fluorescent lights and unending activity. Three in the morning looks the same as noon. Of course, that doesn’t stop us from getting looks from staff on our way down the long corridors to the intensive care wing. I’m sure a few of them are about to inform us that there are set visiting hours, but a dangerous look is enough for them to keep their mouths shut.

I'm one step behind Orion as we reach the circular nurses' station that sits right in the center of the ICU. Nurses and orderlies shuffle by, and machines beep from all directions.

"I got a call from Doctor Ross about my brother, Jack," Orion says to the middle-aged woman behind the desk.

"Mr. Barros." A man in a white coat, who I'm assuming is Doctor Ross, greets us from the mouth of a room, the privacy curtain fluttering as he pushes it open wider. "I just sent Jack to the surgical suite to be prepped for the thoracentesis. I'm about to head down there to join the nurse and get started. It shouldn't take long if you want to wait."

"Yeah, I'll wait." Orion nods. "But what happened? He's on antibiotics. I don't understand why he's getting worse."

"We're still waiting for his cultures to come back to figure out exactly what we're dealing with, but my guess is that this is a viral pneumonia rather than bacterial. And his paralysis is complicating his recovery. Pneumonia is the leading—"

"I know," Orion barks, cutting the doctor off. He drags his fingers through his hair, freeing several strands from the bun. "I'm sorry. I just... is there anything else you can do for him?"

The doctor's lips stretch into a patronizing smile that makes my fingers twitch for something to throw at him. The way Orion's hand balls into a fist, I'm guessing he feels the same way.

"We're doing our best. Now, why don't you go have a seat and I'll see if I can answer any more of your questions after I finish the procedure."

Orion gives another jerky nod, and Doctor Ross leaves us in Jack's empty room. His tennis shoes squeak against the tile floor as he shuffles inside and plops down heavily into the same chair that I'm assuming he's been sleeping in for the past few nights.

"Will you be okay for a few minutes, Boss?" I ask.

"Yeah," he murmurs, barely looking at me, staring at the empty bed and the silent monitors instead.

I walk quickly back down the hallway, not wanting to leave Orion alone any longer than necessary. I haven't been to the ICU here before, but luckily there are enough signs that I manage to find my way to the emergency department without getting lost. The nurse behind this desk looks like she's seen some shit, and probably hasn't had a night off in at least a week. Her eyes sweep over me as I approach, and her face sets into a no-bullshit kind of sternness that makes me like her, even though I know I'm about to piss her off.

She sets a clipboard down hard on top of the counter and shoves it towards me.

"Fill out the forms and bring them back. We triage by severity, so don't expect to be out of here any time before dawn. Any complaints about the wait can go directly to the complaints department." She points at the trash can behind her, and I chuckle.

"Cute." I nudge the clipboard aside and lean on the desk. "Do me a favor and go tell Doctor Anderson that I need a minute of his time."

"Should I go ahead and mark down 'hearing problem' on your form? Or is it more of a comprehension problem?"

I let my friendly grin fall, replacing it with a cool mask that never fails to raise the hairs on the back of people's necks. She sits up a little straighter but doesn't drop the

attitude from her face.

“I can hear just fine,” I assure her. “Now, let’s see how your comprehension skills hold up, huh? Go get Doctor Anderson and tell him Elio Moretti needs a quick word with him.”

She rears back like I slapped her, eyes going wide. It takes all of five seconds before she’s up out of her chair, murmuring an apology. She disappears through a set of doors to do as I asked. And it’s even less time before the tall, rugged doctor, who enjoys all the benefits of being on the Moretti payroll, steps through the same swinging doors with a nervous smile on his face.

“Mr. Moretti,” he says cordially.

“Doctor Anderson, glad you could spare a minute.” I push off the desk and straighten myself up.

“Of course. Why don’t you come to my office.” He holds the door open and tilts his head. “What can I do for you?” he asks as soon as we step into his cluttered office, the door closing behind us to barely muffle the sounds of the emergency room.

“Doctor Ross, is he any good?” I ask, getting straight to the point.

Confusion flickers over his face. “He’s not in my department.”

“But I’m sure you’ve heard nurses talk,” I press.

“Sure,” he agrees. “Doctor Ross is a fine doctor.”

“Fine, not great?” I raise both eyebrows, impatient to get past the bullshit and find out what I need to know.

“I guess it would depend on the situation. He’s a board-certified intensivist, so he’s focused on stabilizing critical patients.”

“Okay, so, say I need the best doctor in the country to treat a patient with quadriplegia and pneumonia.”

Anderson scratches his chin and thinks for a second. “Elaina Hopkins is a pulmonologist who’s been doing a lot of work with complicated cases of pneumonia. She’s probably your best bet.”

“Perfect.” I reach into my pocket and pull out my wallet. “Call her and get her here. She’s going to make sure Jack Barros leaves here healthier than he came in.” I take out five crisp hundreds and set them on his desk. Anderson eyes the money before picking it up and stuffing it into the breast pocket of his coat.

“I’ll see what I can do,” he agrees.

“Don’t see , get it done. Understood?”

He tenses and then bobs his head. “Understood. I’ll take care of it.”

“Good.” I rap my knuckles on his desk and then see myself out.

Orion is in exactly the same place I left him in, still staring at Jack’s bed. I grab a second chair and drag it across the floor, sitting down next to him.

“You know what’s fucked up?” His voice is jagged around the edges.

“What’s that?” I ask, reaching for his hand and lacing my fingers between his like I did earlier in the elevator. Fuck, that feels like a lifetime ago right now.

“I just keep thinking about how much it’s going to cost me for them to drain his lungs. My brother could die and all I can worry about is the goddamn cost.”

I squeeze his hand. “Don’t worry about that, Boss.”

He huffs through his nose.

“Sure, I’ll just pretend money grows on trees.”

“You’ve been so fixated on the bad shit that comes along with dating a guy like me. But there are some upsides too.” I make soothing circles on the back of his hand with my thumb.

He finally tears his eyes off the bed and glances over at me, a furrow between his brows and a hard set to his mouth. I can tell he wants to argue. I’m sure it’s right on the tip of his tongue to tell me to shove my money and any help I’m about to offer him up my ass. He studies my face for a minute, then sighs.

“Are we dating?” he asks blandly instead.

I snort a laugh. “Yeah, Boss. We’re dating.”

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:18 pm*

### Chapter 17

#### ORION

There's something hypnotic about the rhythm I fall into delivering blows to the punching bag at the training gym. Left hook, right hook, roundhouse. Left hook, right hook, roundhouse. Left hook, right hook...

The steady tempo of it reminds me of the beep, beep, beep of Jack's heart monitor that's seeped into my dreams after too many nights of sleeping next to his hospital bed. He finally started to turn around yesterday after two days on an experimental antiviral treatment. He's not totally out of the woods yet, but I might be able to convince myself to sleep at home tonight. Maybe .

I'm positive Elio had something to do with the specialist who showed up on Saturday morning and took over Jack's care, all but shooing Doctor Ross out of the room and closing the curtain right in his face. She was no nonsense, rattling off a bunch of shit I didn't understand to the nurses before switching his treatment. It's not like his previous medications were helping, so I was up for trying anything. Whatever gets my brother off the ventilator and back to staring at the four walls of his Shady Oaks room rather than the four walls of the hospital room will be a fucking improvement.

There's a familiar itch in the back of my mind, of course, creeping under my skin and tightening fresh knots along the back of my neck to replace the ones Elio massaged loose only a few days ago. Jack and I don't need anyone's charity. I've always found ways to take care of him and managed to pay his bills no matter what it cost me. Just like he did for me when we were teenagers.

Left hook, right hook, roundhouse. Left hook, right hook, roundhouse.

“ Yeah, Boss. We’re dating. ” That sweet, confident way he said it when I was spiraling, nothing to grab on to but his hand, has echoed in my ears for days now.

Is that why I didn’t argue when Doctor Hopkins showed up? I’m not just in bed with the mob anymore, I’m dating the mob. I can’t figure out how exactly I went from hate-fucking Elio to all this. I don’t know when I set my list of reasons to steer clear of the Morettis on fire and stepped into the flames without a second thought. But here we are. And I don’t have any plans to turn back now. I’m going to see this thing through, even if it means I end up burned.

Does being with Elio mean bending to the Mafia shit though? Can I have one without the other? Does taking this favor for Jack now mean I’ll owe something else later? I’d love to think relationships don’t work that way, but I left that kind of wide-eyed optimism behind a long damn time ago.

Left hook, right hook, roundhouse. Left hook, right hook, roundhouse.

My muscles ache the way I need them to, and sweat forms on my back, making my shirt cling to my skin as I huff out steady breaths in between each attack. But clearly, I need something more mentally stimulating to stay out of my head. Unless I want to spend all day chasing what-ifs and worries around my mind, I need an opponent who’s going to fight back and keep me on my toes. I catch the bag when it swings towards me, and drag in a slow breath, glancing around the gym for any potential sparring partners.

I zero in on Tito Vasquez, just coming out of the locker room, looking fresh and ready to go a few rounds. He’s been beefing up lately, spending a hell of a lot of time on speed drills and strength training. He might actually give me a run for my money this afternoon, which is exactly what I need.



“Yo, Tito,” I shout.

His steps stutter and he stops mid-stride to look over at me. “Barros, hey.”

“Jump in the ring with me.” I jerk my chin towards the ring, hoping the force of the demand will tip the scales better than requesting a sparring partner has lately. It’s been like pulling teeth. Fucking impossible to get anyone other than Fitz to go a few rounds with me.

“Uh...” Tito shifts his weight and I notice a few other guys slowing down or stopping what they’re doing altogether to eavesdrop without an ounce of subtlety. “I don’t think...”

“Okay, what the fuck is going on here?” The frustration in my chest bursts free, adding an edge of a growl to the question I bark. Even more people stop lifting, stop pounding away at punching bags or each other, turning to stare. “Did I do something to piss you all off?” I look around at all of them, not just Tito this time. “Your egos can’t take that I’m still undefeated? My deodorant isn’t up to par? Did I miss out on some circle jerk and now I’m out of the loop? What ?”

A couple of the guys trade looks, and I get the feeling they’re all playing a game of waiting to see who cracks first.

O’Malley sits up on the bench press and wipes his hands on his shorts. “The whole belonging to the mob thing... Nobody wants to hit you too hard and end up whacked by your boyfriend, Barros.”

I blink once. Twice. A third time. But no amount of clearing my vision or shaking my head gets O’Malley’s words to make any more sense.

“Fucking excuse me?” My throat is tight, and my voice comes out low, deep,

vibrating with an unintended threat that has Tito and a few other guys taking a step back. Like I'm a bomb about to go off.

The silence that follows my question rings in my ears. But no one seems willing or able to elaborate. Belonging to the mob . No one wants to spar with me because Elio showed up here to pick me up last week?

No. O'Malley refused before Elio walked in.

I grind my teeth and try to think back. Did it somehow get out that he's been visiting the locker room after fights for over a year? Even so, it's a pretty big goddamn leap to assume we're dating or to think that their lives are at risk over a friendly bout or two. Did Elio say something to someone?

As soon as the thought occurs to me, I can feel the truth of it in my bones. It's exactly the kind of shit he would do. A memory of the way he asked if Nelson hurt me after the last fight, with worry and simmering rage in his eyes, sends a jolt of heat and irritation through me at the same time. Was Nelson pulling his punches in the last fight? I mentally run through every fight I've had in the last six months, trying to pinpoint if anyone else felt like they were holding back. How long has Elio been fixing my fights without me knowing about it? Is that why I'm still undefeated? Because every fighter in the city is afraid to look at me too hard, let alone knock me out?

A whoosh of air has heads swiveling towards the entrance. Maybe they're hoping for a distraction, or they just can't stand the building tension in my silence and need somewhere else to look. I whip my head towards the door too, hoping whoever just walked in will have more balls than the rest of the guys in here, and be willing to tell me what the fuck O'Malley meant by me "belonging to the mob."

Just my luck, it's better than another fighter who may or may not have any answers

for me. My hands ball into tight fists and my heart beats so hard I'm surprised it doesn't crack a rib.

Elio's eyes land on me and his face lights up in a casual grin, completely unaware of the uncomfortable silence echoing around us, or the fact that half the guys in the gym abandoned their workouts to flee for the locker room the second they recognized him. I'm moving towards him before my brain catches up with my body, striding across the tile floor with long, purposeful steps.

Halfway to him, and he must notice the fire in my eyes because his smile finally falls. "Hey, Boss, what—"

I grab him by the lapels as soon as I reach him, forcing him backward. He stumbles over his feet but manages to move fast enough to correct his balance as I shove him back through the door.

"What the hell did you do?" I hiss through my clenched teeth, still walking him backward, forcing him up onto his toes to keep up with me. His pupils blow wide, and his cheeks turn that light shade of pink that's barely noticeable under his olive skin unless you're looking, or unless you've become so addicted to turning him on that you can't help but see all the signs.

My cock swells to life, making me dizzy but not doing a damn thing to soothe the rage clawing at my chest.

"Help me out here, is this foreplay, or what?" he asks, licking his lips as I push him the last few steps, shoving him right up against his car.

I crowd into him, noticing the smell of citrus on his skin and the rapid flutter of his pulse in his throat. Even through the haze of fury that's currently clouding my mind, something feels different from the last time I had him in a position like this, pressed

up against the wall in his entryway, nearly naked and clutching a pistol he never even tried to threaten me with.

“You know what O’Malley just said to me?” I tighten my grip on his suit jacket, taking a weird amount of pleasure in feeling the silky fabric wrinkle in my sweaty fists. Elio opens his mouth, no doubt to give a smartass answer, but I don’t have the patience for it right now, so I beat him to it. “He said that him and all the other fighters in this city are afraid to hit me because they think my boyfriend is going to whack them.”

He snorts a laugh. “Did he really say whack? Am I Bugsy Siegle now?”

The muscle in my jaw ticks hard, and I shake him. Elio moans and his cock hardens against my thigh. This is just a game to him like everything else, and I should be pissed. I am pissed, but somehow not in the way I expected to be.

He’s fucking with my career. He’s painting me with a permanent fucking black mark that will never wash off. He’s making me question every win I’ve had since the first night he cornered me after a fight. All the reasons I had to hate him before were vague and theoretical. They were moral reasons to be against his lifestyle, not really anything about Elio himself. This right here is personal. It’s as personal as it gets.

The moment crystallizes around me, coming into sharp focus. Twenty minutes ago, I was asking myself when things changed. When I went from hating Elio to falling for him. I had shit backward though, I think. He’s been wearing down my defenses and burrowing under my skin, and I let him. Elio plays the submissive role when things are getting heated, but there’s no doubt that he’s been the one in control of every step of this dance from the beginning. And I let him. I let him get off on my violent side, I let him pull me into his world, and I let him decide the other night at the hospital that this was more than just fucking.

It's finally my turn to make a choice. There are only two ways forward as far as I can tell. I can end it now, tell him to fuck off one last time and to stay out of my life. Would he listen for a change? Something makes me think he would. Even the way his eyes are softening with worry over my long silence tells me that this is it, this is my chance to cut ties without looking back.

Or...

My chest collides with his every time I drag in a deep, shuddering breath. The wind whips through my loose hair and cools the sweat on my skin. All my muscles are tense and coiled, ready for action.

"Did you tell someone that I belong to the Morettis, or otherwise instruct another fighter not to hurt me?" My throat is tight, but I manage to get the question out, my voice just as low and deadly as it was when O'Malley dropped the bomb.

Elio squirms, his eyes glued to mine. He's silent for half a second before he nods once.

"I didn't mean those guys." He waves vaguely in the direction of the gym behind me. "I told that prick with the razor blade at the underground fight that he'd better not fight dirty with you like that again. I might have implied that if anyone else fought dirty with you, I'd hold him responsible for that too."

I huff through my nose and loosen my hold on his jacket, shoving him a little harder up against his car, just for good measure.

"This isn't going to work for me, Elio," I say gruffly. He opens his mouth again, but I'm not done saying what I need to say. "I can't untangle you from your family any more than you could unravel the pieces of me from all my own bullshit and trauma. But it's not going to work between us if you can't give me the fucking breathing

room I need. You can't wave your pistol around just because I get roughed up at a fight that I fucking signed up for. You've got to keep the Moretti shit away from my career. Do we understand each other?"

He sags against his Jaguar with what looks like relief, and maybe a little bit of guilt. He jerks his head in a single nod again.

"Yes, Boss."

"Good." I drag my eyes over him, frustration still simmering in my chest, but it feels like the volume has been turned down. We have a hell of a lot to sort out if this is going to work. It doesn't feel impossible though, and that's terrifying and maybe a little exhilarating. But I'm not quite done with this particular disagreement yet either. "Drop your pants and bend over the hood of your car. I'm going to make sure this is a lesson that sticks."

"What?" Both of his eyebrows shoot up as I take a step back to give him space to do what I told him to.

"You heard me, Brat."

Elio's eyes dart past me, towards the gym a few dozen yards away. There's no one else in the parking lot besides us, and there are other cars blocking anyone from having a full view of us from the gym windows.

"Someone could drive up or leave the gym any time." There's a quiver in his voice that might be fear or excitement—probably both.

"I guess you should have thought about that before you caused trouble." I cross my arms and fix him with a steady, authoritative look. "I'm not going to ask again."

ELIO

There are plenty of things I never thought I'd do. Pulling my pants down for a spanking in broad daylight is right at the top of the list. I look one way, then the other, my insides thrumming with electricity. My cock has been rock hard since Orion grabbed me and shoved me outside, but it's dripping now, precum soaking my briefs.

I drop my gaze and start to fiddle with my belt buckle. My cheeks heat and a hot, tight feeling of humiliation writhes in my gut, making my skin prickle and my balls ache.

"I hope you'll have a good excuse for the cops if they show up to arrest us for indecent exposure," I mutter, dragging my zipper down.

He lets out a dark chuckle, his arms still crossed over his chest, his eyes dancing with anger and something warmer and deeper underneath. Affection? Is it too bold right now to hope it might be love? Hope like that feels cruel, even if it's only in my thoughts. But I let it seep in anyway, filling me with a painful need that's more of a punishment than the public spanking I'm about to get.

"I haven't seen a cop around Wildcliff since your brother took over the family. Funny coincidence, huh?" He cocks his head, then reaches out to hook two fingers in my pants and underwear, yanking them down. I gasp as my cock springs free. "I told you to quit stalling, Brat."

My cock jerks, like it can't decide whether it's thrilled with the kinky turn of events, or if it wants to shrivel up and hide from anyone who might happen to walk by. Orion doesn't wait for me to work it out. He wraps a hand around my upper arm and spins me around to face my car. My breath hitches and a hot stinging feeling tightens behind my eyes.

He puts a hand between my shoulder blades and pushes me, but I'm already bending over, ready to take whatever he wants to give me. The hood of my Jaguar is hot from the sunlight and the engine that hasn't been off for more than a few minutes. It warms my skin and heats my cheek as I sprawl my upper body over it. My belt clangs around my thighs, and the weight of Orion's hand on my back grounds me.

I thought he was going to tell me it was over between us. "This isn't going to work for me," sounded like I wasn't going to work for him. And I was ready to fall to my knees and beg him if that were the case. My chest feels too tight and somehow hollow at the same time just thinking it, just imagining those words coming out of Orion's mouth.

I deserve the punishment that's coming. And I'll happily take it, because punishment means he's not done with me. Punishment means he wants me to do better for him next time. It means there will be a next time. Hell, I'll let him spank me in the UFL ring in front of a million screaming fans if it means this isn't over between us.

Even though I'm expecting the blow, it still manages to come as a surprise, hard and sharp, searing across my right ass cheek. Shame pulses low in my gut, and I squeeze my eyelids tightly closed.

"You've been bad, Elio." Orion's voice is quiet, but no less powerful for the lack of volume. If anything, having to strain my ears, listening to hear if he'll say anything else over the rhythmic sound of a few more sharp swats, only makes it carry more weight. I don't miss the fact that he didn't call me Brat that time, either. He called me Elio.

"I'm sorry." The words rush out on a sob. I didn't mean to say them, but they pull something loose inside me as soon as they're free. "I'm sorry," I rasp again, feeling hot tears leak from my eyes and tumble down my cheeks.



Orion pauses for just a second, then he grunts and rains down another series of hard slaps across both ass cheeks and the backs of my thighs. My skin heats and so does the embarrassment in my stomach.

“What are you sorry for?” He stops spanking and kneads my left cheek roughly. I hiss, my insides vibrating from the pain.

“For...” I squeeze my eyes closed hard again and try to think of the right answer. I’m not sorry for trying to protect him, that’s for damn sure. I guess I’m sorry for getting him mixed up in the Mafia shit, but it’s not as simple as keeping it all separate. I am who I am, and that’s not going to change.

“How about for treating me like I’m some porcelain doll you need to protect?” he suggests, pulling his hand back and cracking it against my ass again. My cock throbs and jerks, and the sting of it ricochets through my organs.

“I... He had a fucking razor blade ,” I argue, the shame that bent me over to begin with receding behind a wave of defiance. “Fair enough, I don’t want to fuck with your career, but those underground fights...”

Orion growls and grabs my pants, yanking them back into place and taking a step away from me.

“What am I going to do with you?” he mutters. “Put yourself back together.”

I swallow and push myself off the hood of the car, tucking my dick away and zipping up before turning to face him. I can feel my face glowing from the warmth of the car, along with the lingering humiliation and guilt.

“I am sorry that dipshit took things too far with my warning and caused problems with your career.”

He tilts his head back towards the sky, like he's praying for patience from a god I'm pretty sure he doesn't believe in. Then he pinches the bridge of his nose and looks at me again.

"Putting the blame on someone else isn't going to work for me. I want a real apology. I want you to tell me what you did wrong. Now."

I shiver and stuff my hands into my pockets. I remember my dad once telling me that apologizing is weak. It's like rolling over and showing your soft spots to someone who might go ahead and tear your guts out for your trouble. Maybe I'm okay with Orion tearing my guts out. I've sure as hell already showed him all of my soft spots. But that doesn't make the words come any easier.

"I'm sorry... for being a goddamn Moretti instead of a regular, fucked-up guy."

His face stays stony for another beat, then crumples with a bark of laughter. "I guess I'll take that. For now, anyway." Orion steps closer again, closing in on me in a blink, his hands on my face and his body up against mine. "Were any of my wins fixed?"

I shake my head. "No. I swear on my life, I would never do that."

His nostrils flare and his eyes darken again, but he seems to accept the answer. He rests his forehead against mine and drags his thumb along the stubble on my jaw. "I don't care if someone leaves me half dead after an underground fight, you stay out of it next time. Got it?"

"Absolutely not." My answer stills the stroke of his thumb.

"Elio."

"No," I say again, firmly. "You shouldn't even be doing underground fights."

Orion sighs. “You’re not planning to make any of this easy for me, are you?”

“No,” I answer a third time, my lips twitching with a smirk. “But I don’t think you like me because it’s easy.”

His eyes search mine, probing and intense, ratcheting my heart rate up again, reaching deep down inside me like he’s making himself at home there, among all the cobwebbed skeletons.

“No, I guess you’re right,” he murmurs in agreement, slamming his lips into mine in a hard, claiming kiss. I pant against his mouth, grabbing a fistful of his shirt and twisting it, pressing myself against him and melting into his body.

It’s definitely not going to be easy between us. Easy is fucking boring anyway.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:18 pm*

### Chapter 18

#### ORION

I'm not sure if I can imagine anything more satisfying than marching the Mafia underboss back into the gym with his hair disheveled and a bratty scowl on his kiss swollen lips.

The guys who fled into the locker room when Elio arrived are back at their weight benches or punching bags now. Every eye turns in our direction as we step back inside. There's a surprising amount of power and control in it. Enough to make my chest swell just a little. I could see how this kind of thing might go to someone's head, especially when it's all they've ever known.

Elio looks over his shoulder at me and I harden my expression, not leaving any room for him to try to worm his way out of this. Spanking him over the hood of his car was hardly a punishment. That was my miss. But a public correction of his bad behavior? Yeah, I think that will do the trick. And hopefully it'll solve my problem too.

He clears his throat, straightens his tie, smooths out his suit jacket...

I nudge him between the shoulder blades.

"I'm doing it," he grumbles under his breath.

"Try that again, Brat?" I bark back, not bothering to keep my voice down. If he wants to fuck around, then I don't mind everyone else knowing what a spoiled shit he likes

to be. A spoiled shit who's always eager to get on his knees for me. A spoiled shit who drew me a bath and massaged my shoulders until I melted like butter. A spoiled shit who wrapped himself around me like I was a teddy bear in his bed, then threw his weight and money around to take care of my brother without me ever asking.

He's right, I don't want easy . I want whatever the hell this is. For better or for worse.

Elio huffs but doesn't test the tenuous control I have on my patience. Instead, he clears his throat, as if everyone isn't already focused on him with a kind of morbid curiosity and fear written all over their faces.

"There's a misunderstanding I want to correct. The threat I made about hurting Orion was only meant to apply to guys fighting dirty. Treat him like you'd treat any other fighter. If I catch anyone pulling their punches or avoiding getting into the ring with him, then we're going to have a problem."

"You can't even help yourself, can you?" I sigh.

He turns back towards me and shrugs, not looking the least bit apologetic about managing to find a loophole to threaten everyone in the gym when he's supposed to be eating crow.

"You wanted it fixed. It's fixed." He drops his voice lower. "I can't look weak, Boss. It puts you in danger, and it puts my family in danger."

"Yeah, alright." I hadn't thought about how much pressure there must be to always make sure everyone is properly terrified of you. Or maybe I have. It's not like I live my life all that differently, the threats are just different.

"Listen, if you're done reminding me who's boss and making my dick hard, I actually swung by for a reason," he says, his voice still low. No one is paying attention to us

anymore, aside from the occasional nervous glance they're still giving Elio.

My skin prickles with unspent adrenaline and nerves. I grunt and nod.

“Let me grab my stuff and you can tell me about it in the car.” I’m already moving towards the locker room to grab my bag, but I turn around mid-stride to smirk at him. “By the way, this counts as a second week. Make sure payroll knows.”

Elio scoffs. “You work one day a week and expect to get paid like that?”

“Supply and demand.” I wink, then spin back around just in time to push through the swinging door.

It only takes me a minute to grab my bag and tie my hair up. I have no clue where we’re headed, but I’m not optimistic enough to think I’ll get off as easily as I did the other night. If all Elio needed was someone to stand behind him and scowl, I’m sure he has plenty of goons for that. The luxury of cleaning up later in that jungle waterfall he calls a shower is at least something to look forward to.

Elio’s waiting for me right where I left him, and as far as I can tell, everyone’s gotten bored with staring at him and returned to their training. When I reach him, I throw an arm around his shoulders. He leans into me in a way that feels completely casual, completely natural . We could be a couple of guys headed out for a nice date at a fancy restaurant for all anyone else would know. Maybe I’ll get him to order us some expensive takeout after we maim whichever criminal is on our list this afternoon.

Is that romance? It kind of feels like it is.

“We’re going to talk to Jimmy Lee,” Elio tells me once we’re in the thick of the city traffic, headed towards the west side of the city.

“And who exactly is Jimmy Lee?” More importantly, does Elio have some kind of spreadsheet on hand that he can reference as needed? Or does he just remember the name of every petty dealer and pimp in Wildcliff off the top of his head?

“He’s got his fingers in a bit of everything. Drugs, girls, gambling. Xaviaro’s had to rough him up a few times to remind him of his place, but for the most part, he’s a mid-level conman willing to do just about anything for a quick buck or some street cred,” he explains.

Just the name ‘Xaviaro’ sends a chill down my spine. You don’t have to be a criminal in this city to know not to cross the infamous trigger man.

“So, he’ll know what Casimir is up to. What are the chances he’ll give it up easily?” I keep my voice steady, hoping Elio can’t hear the slight quiver of nerves underneath.

“Depends how much of a cut he’s taking on the whole thing.” He shrugs one shoulder and turns down the next street, taking us through a neighborhood that’s a step above mine. The buildings are older, but a lot of them have been renovated in the past few years, bringing up the prices on the entire block.

“I guess that’s where I come in.” I test out the cocky threat, surprised by how natural it feels.

Elio’s description of Jimmy hits closer to home than I would like too. He’s willing to do anything for cash and a boost to his reputation. I could’ve said the same thing about Jack. I could say the same thing about myself. It’s not like I got into MMA for fun. I did it because throwing my fists around was the only way I knew how to survive. I did it for money. And right now, I’m in the passenger seat of Elio’s car for the exact same reason.

Maybe the only difference between a criminal and a law-abiding person is

desperation. Elio might not be desperate like Jimmy or like me, but he's desperate in his own ways. He's backed into corners just like I am, they're just different corners.

He pulls into a spot in front of one of the nicer buildings on the street and parks.

"Ready to do this?"

"As I'll ever be," I say, pushing my door open and getting out.

No one on the sidewalk spares us so much as a glance. You'd think Elio's expensive suit and flashy car would draw some looks, but I guess most people in this city know better than to stare. You mind your business and you keep your head down, that's the only way to survive. Unless you want to rely on fists and bullets. I guess I chose my lot a long damn time ago, I just didn't realize it.

I'm about to ask him how he plans to get inside the building when someone steps out and Elio hurries forward to catch the door with a polite smile. The man nods, either assuming we live in the building or not giving a damn one way or the other. Elio pulls the door open wider and waves me through.

The hallway smells like fresh paint, all the walls a pristine white that makes my eyes ache as I follow Elio up the stairs.

"You know the home address of every criminal in this city by heart?" I ask.

He chuckles. "Not all of them. Just the ones who cause enough trouble to warrant a visit from time to time. It's Xav's department, but what kind of upper management would I be if I didn't know how the sausage is made?"

I wrinkle my nose, imagining a faceless mob hitman in an Armani suit stuffing some greasy dude into a meat grinder and making sausage with him. Now there's a morbid



thought. Although, it might make for an interesting cooking show.

“ Welcome back to Hitman Kitchen. This afternoon we have a nicely marbled pimp that I’m going to show you how to properly grill. Now, if you don’t have your own fresh corpse on hand, store bought is fine. But I do highly recommend a fresh kill if you have the time. It makes all the difference. ”

A manic laugh bubbles up in my throat, and I shake off the gruesome daydream.

“Here we are,” Elio says, stopping in front of apartment 3C. He raises his fist and pounds hard. It’s the kind of knock that would set anyone’s heart racing on the other side of the door.

We wait. I strain my ears, listening for any sign of movement inside the apartment, my face fixed into a hard, threatening mask. The minutes tick by without an answer.

“Open the fuck up, Jimmy. We need to talk.” Elio raps his knuckles on the door again. He barely waits this time before reaching for the doorknob. It twists easily in his hand, and the door creaks open. “Jimmy Lee,” he shouts into the apartment. “You’re trying my patience, asshole.”

Still no answer, but the unmistakable metallic smell of blood fills my nose.

“Maybe he’s not home?” It’s wishful thinking, I know that even as I mutter the words and follow Elio into the apartment.

Everything inside looks relatively neat and tidy. No obvious sign of a struggle. But the thick stench of blood gets stronger the deeper we go. Elio heads straight for a door just past the living room, and I’m right behind him. Just like the front door, it’s unlocked, and it swings open easily.

What's left of Jimmy Lee is sprawled out on his bed. I think his comforter used to be white, but it's soaked crimson now. I put a hand over my mouth and nose, but that doesn't do much to stop the odor seeping in. It's not rot—I'm guessing he hasn't been dead long enough—but blood and gunpowder have a stomach-churning scent all their own.

"Well, fuck," Elio mutters with a put-out sigh. "I guess he finally pissed off the wrong person."

"Or someone didn't want him to talk. Maybe Manny let it slip to someone that you were coming here to get some answers about Casimir."

His eyebrows go up, and he nods. "Good point. Whoever it is could still be hanging around. We'd better deal with this, and then I think it might be time to go straight to the source."

"Casimir?" I guess.

"Yup. I'm not going to waste time chasing my tail all over the city if someone's playing these fucking games." He shrugs out of his jacket and walks over to the closet to grab a hanger, casual as can be. He hangs it up, then rolls up his shirtsleeves. "You have the stomach to help me with this? Or do you want to go wait outside?"

Do I? I eye the corpse and lower my hand from my mouth, drawing in steady breaths to calm my stomach.

"I can do it."

"You sure, Boss? I won't think any less of you. This shit is far from glamorous."

"I'll be fine," I answer again.

Elio's phone starts to buzz in his pocket.

"Hey, Enz, what's up?" he answers. I can't hear the words coming from the other end, but the deep, even tone of his brother's voice is exactly what I would expect from everything I've heard about Lorenzo Moretti. Elio chuckles at whatever Lorenzo says. "Good timing, actually. Just walked in on a proper crime scene at Jimmy Lee's place. Looks like two to the head. We think he probably knew something, and someone made sure he wouldn't talk."

They trade a few more words before Elio hangs up and shoves his phone back into his pocket.

"You can thank my brother for saving you from having to save face and dismember a body. He's sending some guys over to handle it for us. We've gotta get down to Wild for a family meeting about Casimir."

My heart jumps into my throat. A meeting with the most powerful Morettis? I think I'd rather deal with the corpse.

ELIO

Orion didn't say a word on our drive from Jimmy's place to the club. He's stiff next to me, his fingers crushing mine as I lead him through Wild.

"Don't worry, Boss. They're all bark." I tighten my hand around his.

He chokes out a sound that I think is meant to be laughter, but is just a little too nervous to quite pull it off. "They literally all kill people."

"Well, yeah, but almost never during a family meeting." I wave off his concern with my free hand.

“Right,” he mutters. “Should I even be here?”

His question stops me short for a second. I spin on him and grab a fistful of his shirt, the same way he did to me earlier. I’m no stranger to using intimidation when necessary, throwing my weight around, getting up in guys’ faces. But I feel off-kilter grabbing Orion when I would much rather he be the one manhandling me .

“I don’t know about you, but I don’t go around getting deep with random people. I sure as hell don’t let just anyone boss me into a public spanking in broad daylight. But if all of this is casual for you and I’m making a fool of myself, tell me now.”

He ghosts his fingertips along my jaw, his throat bobbing as he swallows hard and then nods. I lean into the touch, and as soon as I do, he slips his hand behind my neck and jerks me forward, bringing us nose to nose.

“You saying I’m family whether I like it or not?” His lips twitch with amusement and I nod, bumping my forehead against his.

He huffs out a sigh, then catches my mouth in a rough, claiming kiss.

“Come on.” I let go of his shirt and tug on his hand when he breaks the kiss. “Give them a chance. You might even like them.”

Orion grunts and we make our way through the rest of the club to the Moretti table.

All eyes swivel in our direction as we approach. There’s a subtle lift of Lorenzo’s brow, and Alessio grins with childlike fucking glee as he looks Orion up and down. Sal sputters a cough into a sip of his drink, and Sparrow doesn’t even try to muffle his shocked gasp. Xaviaro is the only one who looks entirely bored by this new development. His eyes flick to our joined hands with indifference before he returns to his usual pastime of absently scanning the surrounding area.

“You didn’t tell any of them I was coming, did you?” Orion mutters quietly.

“It was implied,” I scoff.

“Was it?” Alessio drops his feet from the table and straightens himself up. “Maybe I missed the memo about your new... bodyguard?”

“That definitely must have gotten lost in the interoffice mail, because I didn’t get it either,” Sal says.

“You didn’t tell them about me at all, did you?” I can’t tell whether Orion sounds annoyed or amused.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. It’s not like we make a habit of sitting around talking about our feelings. Orion and I are together. There, now you all know.” I turn and snag an extra chair from a nearby table.

“You know, you’re right, I’ve always said we should make time to talk about our feelings more,” Alessio says solemnly.

“I’m feeling like I need a drink,” Lorenzo mutters.

Right on cue, Dante saunters over. He’s dressed in a pair of fishnet stockings and red booty shorts tonight, and nothing else. A silver barbell in each of his nipples and a third through his belly button all glint under the glow of the club lights.

“I heard drinks. What do you thirsty boys need?” He puts a hand on the back of Alessio’s chair while he takes our drink orders, and I notice Sal’s gaze lingering on it the whole time.

“I’ll take another too,” Salvatore says, holding up his now empty glass.

“Nope,” Dante says.

“I’m sorry, what?” Sal glances around the table, like he’s trying to make sure we all heard what he did.

“That’s your third drink already. I’ll bring you water, but that’s all you’re getting.” There’s an unmistakable edge of authority in Dante’s voice that has almost all of us shifting in our seats.

It’s hard to tell in this lighting, but I’m pretty sure Sal is blushing too. He opens and closes his mouth like a fish for a few seconds before finding his voice.

“Are you serious? You’re not going to bring me a drink? I’m not even drunk. Breathalyze me if you want to.”

Dante slides his hand off of Alessio’s chair. He puts both of them on the table between him and Sal, and leans in.

“Fine. It’s not about how many you’ve already had. You cost me five hundred bucks last night when you chased off that guy who got handsy, and I feel like teaching you a lesson. Be glad it’s only your booze that I’m cutting off.” He smirks through the entire threat, then pushes himself upright again, leaving all of us in stunned silence as he saunters away to get everyone else’s drink.

“He scares me,” Alessio admits quietly.

“Me too,” Salvatore agrees, but his voice sounds a hell of a lot more awed than scared if you ask me.

Lorenzo clears his throat. “What are we going to do about Casimir?” Right through the bullshit and straight to the point. That’s why he’s in charge.

“A bullet between the eyes is always effective,” Xaviaro suggests casually.

“Except we don’t actually know what he’s done yet,” I remind him.

Sparrow’s shoulders twitch with a lazy shrug. “If he’s killing people to keep them quiet, you can bet it’s bad.”

“We don’t know Casimir killed Jimmy,” Orion points out.

“And it’s not just about a fair punishment or not,” Enzo adds. “If we don’t know what he’s up to, killing him might just mean we’re taking out a middleman.”

“Is there any other information we can dig up on him digitally? You got the bank records; you can’t get anything else?” I ask Sparrow.

“I’ve tried, but it’s beyond my skill level. His emails are encrypted, his cybersecurity is top notch. Whatever he’s doing, he’s covering his ass.”

The sound of another throat clearing draws everyone’s attention. Dante is back with a tray of drinks. His head is held high, but a glint of nerves in his eyes piques my interest.

“You know something about hacking, angioletto ?” Salvatore asks, picking up on the same thing I am.

Dante sets each of the drinks down one by one, keeping us all in suspense waiting for his answer.

“I learned some tricks from my former cellie. I could take a look at whatever it is you’re trying to decrypt.”

“Cellie? As in...” Sparrow leans forward with interest.

“Prison, pretty boy,” he confirms.

I trade a look across the table with Enzo. It’s not like we’re asking him to take a look at our books. Whatever Casimir is hiding has fuck all to do with Moretti business besides the unfortunate fact that it’s going on in our city, right under our noses.

“It couldn’t hurt to let him look at it, right? Worst case, we’re no better off than we are right now, and we just have to go in blind to beat some answers out of him.”

Lorenzo drums his fingers on the table once, his face impassive as he considers it, no doubt running the same balance sheet through in his head that I just did. Worst case, we end up losing the most popular dancer at Wild to a plastic bag at the bottom of the ravine. Enzo nods, then looks back at Dante.

“When you get off shift tonight, Salvatore will pick you up and fill you in on what you’ll need to know.”

“Wouldn’t it make more sense for Sparrow to...” Alessio starts to argue, trailing off when he sees the flat, bored look on my brother’s face. The boss has spoken.

Enzo ignores Alessio’s comment and adds one more addendum to the order he’s giving Dante. “Depending on what you find, Salvatore may keep you close until we’ve dealt with the problem to ensure you don’t go running your mouth all around town before we can handle things.”

Dante hesitates for a second, looking across the table at Sal again. “Yeah, alright. We’ll talk about my hourly fee when you pick me up.” He smirks and leaves us alone again.



With that settled, the meeting wraps up quickly. A few other odds and ends, and then Enzo shoos us all away, giving me a meaningful look that I'm sure has to do with the fact that I didn't bother to tell him about Orion until tonight.

"Enz," I start to say as the other guys file past me, Orion's presence heavy at my back.

"We'll talk later. Your boyfriend is waiting." He jerks his chin. Even I don't have the balls to argue with a direct dismissal from him.

"Well, that was an anticlimactic night." I slip my hand into Orion's as we make our way out of the club again.

He chuckles in agreement. "Do you want to go somewhere else?"

"Where did you have in mind, Boss?" I ask, and a slow smile spreads over his lips.

### Chapter 19

#### ORION

Whatever needs to happen next with Casimir, I know my temp job as Moretti muscle isn't over yet. But for tonight at least, it feels like a weight is off my shoulders. I met Lorenzo Moretti and lived to tell the tale. Not that I would tell anyone. I might be bold enough to spank a Mafia underboss in public, but my bravery definitely doesn't extend to testing my luck and flapping my gums about the head honcho.

"Give me your keys," I say in response to Elio's question as we make our way out of Wild, skirting around the horndogs panting over the dancers up on stage and the half-naked men carrying trays of drinks.

I'm not sure if I'm intending the command to be a test or not, but it kind of feels like one. He says this shit is serious, brought me to meet his family, but does he really trust me enough to hand over the keys to his hundred-thousand-dollar sports car? He doesn't hesitate though. In one fluid movement, Elio reaches into his pocket, pulls out his keys, and tosses them to me. I snatch them out of the air with my free hand and wrap my fingers around them, the jagged edge of the key biting into my palm.

"Does that mean you're not going to tell me?" he guesses, nodding politely to the bouncer who rushes to open the door for us. Elio doesn't even slow his steps. He was expecting that kind of treatment. Instead of pissing me off for a change, it amuses me. And it definitely makes me want to put him over my lap and call him a brat again while I spank him.

My cock perks up at the idea.

“Nope,” I answer with a smirk.

I’m not sure why the idea occurred to me. Maybe it’s not even somewhere he’ll want to go. It’s not too late to pick a restaurant instead and take him on a traditional date. He drops my hand when we reach his car, going around to the passenger side and climbing in. I watch him through the windshield for a few seconds, noticing the strand of hair that breaks ranks momentarily before he cards his fingers through it to get it back in line, and the slight wrinkle in his jacket from the way I grabbed him earlier. My stomach flips and flutters, my insides heating all at once with feelings I never expected. Feelings that have been quietly building longer than I think I realized.

I swallow around the tightness in my throat and get into the car. Fuck a boring, traditional date.

I rev the engine, and he leans back in his seat, seeming perfectly at ease with me behind the wheel. He never even bothered to ask if I can drive. I chuckle at that realization.

“Right pedal for stop, left pedal for go, right?” I tease stoically. Elio’s eyebrows jump up while I grab the gear shift and yank it into drive. “Never mind, I got it.” I slam my foot down on the gas and peel out of the parking spot.

“And I’m the brat?” he mutters, buckling his seat belt and then grabbing the door handle while I test out the Jag’s handling with a couple of quick turns through the parking lot before finally slowing down and easing out onto the street.

It takes a minute to mentally map out the city and remember how to get where I want to go from here. It’s been nearly twenty years since I’ve taken some of these streets.

The buildings become progressively more dilapidated around us, then start to thin out, apartments and high rises giving way to stand-alone buildings, warehouses, and empty shells that stopped being used for anything but homeless encampments and various criminal activities before I was even born.

“What are the chances that the Dante and Salvatore situation ends in bloodshed?” I ask conversationally, keeping my eyes on the pothole laden road ahead of me, swerving every few feet one way or the other to avoid the bigger ones. Luckily, there’s no one else on the road in this part of the city.

“High.” He laughs. “But I’m pretty sure that’s what Sal is hoping for. I’m even more sure Lorenzo knows it. He sees everything. He’s got eyes everywhere, but it’s more than that. Enzo is just... observant. He’s always aware, always alert, always thinking and planning. I don’t know how he does it. It fucking exhausts me just thinking about it.” The awe in his voice when he talks about his brother makes my chest tighten and my throat feel thick.

I tighten my grip on the steering wheel and press a little harder on the gas again, disregarding the speed limit written on signs too covered in graffiti to read anyway.

“That’s how Jack always was too. He was the man with the plan, fucking sharp and determined.” My voice cracks and I clear my throat.

Elio reaches over to put a hand on my thigh, and the warmth of his touch through the cotton of my pants is grounding, even if it can’t do anything to fix all the shit that’s broken and unfair in the world.

“I hope I can meet him sometime. When he’s out of the hospital and up for visitors, of course.” He says it so casually that it twists the knot a little tighter in my chest. He grips my thigh harder and then eases off. “Unless you don’t want me to. If you think he’d be disapproving or...”

A harsh laugh forces its way out of my throat. “He would definitely disapprove. But I actually think he would like you. I’m going to have a lot of fucking explaining to do though when I do introduce you.” I spot the ghostly outline of the abandoned warehouse I’ve been looking for, and ease off the gas to be ready for the turn. “After he got hurt, he made me promise I wouldn’t turn to you guys for a loan or start taking money to throw fights.”

“The moral objection runs in the family, I take it?” The amusement in his voice almost makes me laugh again. Like he finds it cute that anyone would be ethically appalled by the Moretti family business.

“Nah.” I shake my head and roll to a stop in front of the building. “I think he thought I was too soft, that if I got mixed up in all this stuff, I’d end up getting pulled in too deep.” I let out another rusty chuckle. “I guess he wasn’t wrong.”

I blow out a breath and turn off the car. Elio seems to realize we’ve stopped for the first time. I look over and he tears his gaze off of me to peer through the windshield at the building in front of us. There’s a chain around the main door, which is doing fuck all thanks to the massive hole in the side of the building, easily large enough for several men to walk through at once. The windows are all either caked with dirt or completely shattered, the parking lot is more weeds than cement, and the fading graffiti suggests that even the taggers and gangs stopped bothering to come out here a long damn time ago.

“You brought me to an abandoned warehouse?” He unbuckles his seat belt and climbs out.

“What, is this place not first date material?” I tease, getting out on my side and stuffing the keys into my pocket.

“This isn’t our first date, Boss,” he scoffs.

“No? What was our first date?” I jerk my head towards the makeshift entrance and Elio follows me.

“The underground fight at Lou’s, obviously. I tended to your wounds, and you manhandled me into a blowjob. It doesn’t get much more romantic than that.” He smirks, and I step through the opening, then turn around to grab him by the collar and drag him in after me.

He gasps, then laughs, stumbling inside and colliding with me.

“I guess I can’t argue with that.” I slip one hand around the back of his neck and pull him in for a brief, rough kiss, nipping at his bottom lip and swallowing the moan that vibrates on his tongue.

I pull back and he stumbles again, looking dazed after even a few seconds of our tongues tangling. Jesus, I could get used to that. Fuck it, I’m more than used to it already.

Elio looks past me, and I watch his expression for a second as he takes it in, his eyebrows twitching and his eyes flickering around the space. It’s not hard to figure out what this place is, but he’s not going to get much further than that without context.

I turn around to face the open space. The rusted, broken-down machinery from the early days of the factory is in pieces, littering the outer edges of the room. In the center, there’s a makeshift ring. It’s even more low budget and brutal than the one at Lou’s, than any of the other underground rings I’ve climbed into over the past handful of years to pay Jack’s bills. It’s nothing more than some frayed ropes tied to support beams to create a rough rectangle of space. The cement inside the ropes is stained brown with years of blood that was hastily mopped up, or not cleaned up at all.

The phantom sound of shouts and cheers fills my ears, making my heart race and my muscles tense, ready for a fight. The thick layer of dust covering everything makes it obvious that no one has held a fight here in years, but I swear I can still smell the sweat and blood mixing with cigarette and cigar smoke, crawling down my throat to churn in my gut.

“This is where I had my first fight.” I cross the space and duck between the ropes, my mind filling in a million details about that night I didn’t even know I remembered. Like the taste of the cheap canned spaghetti I’d had for dinner burning in the back of my throat and the glare of the lights pointed at the ring. My eyes twitch into a squint in reaction to the memory, even though the only light now is from the moon through the broken windows. “I was fifteen. Scrawniest little shit you’ve ever seen. I’m pretty sure every single asshole in this place that night was expecting to see me hauled out of here on a stretcher. I was matched against this forty-year-old dude with a beer gut and these massive hands that I swear to god looked like bear paws, they were so hairy.”

A laugh gets caught in my throat. Elio’s hand on my back surprises me, pulling me back into the present again as it slides up my spine, between my shoulder blades, and comes to rest on the back of my neck.

“That’s fucked up, Boss,” he murmurs, and I nod.

“I went absolutely apeshit on him though. It felt like I’d been saving up every ounce of rage I had at my parents, at every pervert who offered me money or food for sex, at the fucking world, and I unleashed it all on him. I think I caught him off guard more than anything, but it was enough to get the upper hand and knock him the fuck out.”

“I think you still do that.” He presses his thumb into a knot on the back of my neck to loosen it and rests his chin on my shoulder. “You’re feral in the ring. It’s like you’re rage personified. It gets my dick hard every time.”

I lean into him and smirk. “Is there anything I do that doesn’t get your dick hard?”

“Not a damn thing,” he purrs, pressing a kiss to the side of my throat.

The warmth of his lips against my skin sends a shiver through me. The memories from that night feel like they drained all the heat from my body, leaving my skin clammy and covered in goose bumps, but Elio’s touch chases the chill away.

I turn my head to look at him.

“Think you can take me?” I challenge, arching one eyebrow.

“Absolutely,” he answers, then looks away from me to glance at the ring around us again. “Oh, you mean in a fight?” I bark out a laugh. Unlike the last few, instead of tightening my insides, this one loosens everything, unraveling the tangle left by the ghosts of the past. “I’m more of a lover than a fighter if I can help it. Besides, there’s probably enough blood soaked into this cement already, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.” I scuff my shoe against the stain.

“You still want to fight, don’t you?” he asks with humor in his voice.

“Kind of,” I admit.

“Alright.” He pushes off of me and shrugs out of his jacket for the second time tonight. He slings it over one of the ropes and rolls up his sleeves, one at a time. I watch the flex of the muscles in his forearms and the dexterity of his fingers. It’s ridiculous how mesmerized I am by every single inch of him. He bounces his shoulders up and down like he’s loosening them up and then puts his fists up in a fighting stance, a playful smile dancing on his lips. “Come on, Boss. Rough me up.”



The sound that rumbles through my throat is part amusement, part threat. I roll my head one way, then the other. “With an invitation like that, how can I resist?”

ELIO

I may not be an MMA fighter, but convincing an opponent to underestimate you always gives you a bit of an edge. Orion pointed out that’s how he won his first fight, but that doesn’t stop him from falling into the same trap.

He gives me a dangerous, toothy grin, like he has me exactly where he wants me. My cock swells and my heart rate speeds up, but I ignore both, holding my hands as awkwardly as I can manage to give weight to my ruse.

He lunges forward, arm swinging at half speed. I dodge it and send a jab right into his unguarded gut.

“Oomph ,” he gasps, stumbling back a couple of inches, surprise coloring his face.

“Just because I’m a lover, doesn’t mean I don’t know how to fight.” I wink and go in for a second hit. Orion’s ready for it this time. He dodges and weaves, his laughter echoing off the high ceilings along with mine, the scrape of our feet against the bare floor the only other sound for miles. At least it feels that way.

“You think you’re cute, Brat?” he teases, catching me with a feather-soft uppercut.

“Kind of.” I smirk. “Now, stop babying me and hit me for real.” I swing my fist full force into the side of his jaw to punctuate my point, feeling the scrape of his stubble against my knuckles.

He grunts and his eyes darken, narrowing into slits as his nostrils flare. Now we’re getting somewhere. I lick my lips and swing again. Orion catches my fist in his palm

and uses the momentum of the swing to spin me around. He kicks my legs out from under me before I have time to reorient myself, and I barely manage to brace myself on the way down.

He's on me just as fast, the hard, heavy press of his body blanketing me, pinning me to the cold cement. My cock throbs and my nipples tighten, my breath coming out in a shuddering gasp. Orion straddles me, the thick, hard outline of his erection heavy against my ass. Just like in the alley, I feel frantic and excited at the same time, all of my nerve endings igniting, my pulse thundering in my ears. Some primal part of me convinces me to thrash, even though there's nowhere to go unless he decides to let me up.

Orion leans down, his hot breath bathing my ear as he brings his lips close to whisper, "This real enough for you? Or do you want me to get rougher?" He grinds the length of his cock against my ass cheeks, one hand between my shoulders to hold me down even harder. I writhe, trying to put any space between myself and the floor so I can free my hands, kicking my legs and whining low in my throat. There's a sick kind of power in feeling this helpless, in knowing there's nothing to do but let go.

"Yes," I moan. I'm not sure which of those questions I'm answering, or if I'm just begging him for more. Maybe all three. Or maybe 'yes' is the only word that my tongue knows when Orion is on top of me.

I can feel the cold from the floor through the thin, silky material of my pants. It's a sharp contrast to the heat of my arousal, making the eager throb of my cock more intense. Almost dizzying.

He drags his tongue along the curve of my jaw, leaving a wet streak on my skin that's demeaning and claiming and so fucking hot that I whine again. My balls tighten and ache, and precum slicks the head of my cock, sticking to my briefs, making the cold of the floor even more noticeable. The sting of his teeth biting into the same spot he

just licked sends a jolt of electricity through me. The marks he left in the alley have already faded, and I want him to cover me in a thousand more. I want to be a canvas that he paints with his teeth and hands, covering me in bruises that I can watch fade all over again, just so I can beg for more.

Orion's chest vibrates against my back with a deep, hungry moan as he bites down a little harder. It almost feels like he heard my dirty fantasy, but I think it's more likely that he just has the same one.

He jerks his hips, grinding his cock into the crease of my ass again. My hole twitches, my insides so empty I can hardly breathe. I need his bruises there too, stretching my hole, pounding all the places no one can see, but that I'll be able to feel for days after he's finished with me.

"I can't stop thinking about fucking you bare, Elio," he growls, the low rumble of his voice raising goose bumps all over my skin and pulling even tighter around my balls.

"Yes," I rasp, squirming underneath him again, not trying to get away this time, but trying to get enough leverage to tilt my hips and offer him my ass like the cock slut I am for him. "Jesus, yes, Orion. Spank me, bite me, fuck me bare so your cum drips out of my hole for days after. Please, please, please."

He lifts his weight off of me, and I wail in protest. I need more. His hands all over me, his tongue and teeth on every inch of my skin, his hot breath in my ear again. I shove my hips up towards him, and he reaches underneath me. His fingers brush the bulge of my needy cock and I gasp.

"It's fucking embarrassing how desperate you are for it, Brat," Orion taunts, blindly undoing my belt with one hand.

A pulse of shame ricochets through me, inky and bitter and fucking perfect. My cock

jerks and dribbles another burst of precum, spit leaking from the corner of my mouth to pool between my cheek and the floor. His fingers brush over my length again as he unbuttons my pants and tugs the zipper down. All business, like he can't even be bothered with a cursory grope. I squirm and whimper, humping my ignored cock against his palm.

I don't know how being treated like nothing makes me feel everything , but it does. It's twisted and backward, but when he refuses to see me, it's like he ends up seeing parts of me no one else has ever bothered to look for.

"Pathetic." He tuts, hooking his fingers into my pants and underwear and tugging them down just below my ass in one quick movement.

My cock slaps against the frigid floor, and I moan loudly, my insides quaking with his addictively dismissive tone and the shock of the cold against my overheated skin. I jerk my hips again, rubbing myself against the concrete, leaving wet streaks of precum.

Orion's palm lands with a jolting slap against my ass cheek, renewing the ache from the earlier spanking. It knots my stomach and builds inside of my balls, forcing a breathless groan past my lips.

He grabs my ass cheeks roughly, separating them, parting them so wide he tugs at my hole.

"You ever stick your fingers in here and imagine it was me?" he asks, ghosting his thumb lightly over my pucker.

"Yes." It really does seem to be the only word I know. But that's okay because it's the only one I need.

“Yeah? After a fight, in that big, fancy shower of yours? Did you slick your fingers up with shampoo and pound this tight, slutty hole while you moaned my name?” His voice is a low growl, prickling over my skin and burrowing inside me.

“ Yes ,” I practically wail.

Something wet rains down between my ass cheeks, sliding down my crack and pooling around my hole. Spit? I try to push my hips up towards him again, but he pins me to the ground with his hands on my ass.

“You want it to hurt, Brat?” Orion’s cock nudges against the curve of my ass cheek, slick with his own precum.

“Yes,” I rasp for what has to be the millionth time.

The word is barely past my lips before he’s splitting me open. I didn’t realize I’d closed my eyes, but they fly open now, all of the air punched out of my lungs as the sharp pain I was craving sears through me. I shriek and pant, trying again to push my hips up to get more. Deeper, harder, tear me in two and don’t bother putting me back together. That’s what I would say if I knew any word other than ‘yes’ right now. Since I don’t, I just chant that instead.

“Yes, yes, yes, yesssss.”

A fresh splash of spit cascades over my oversensitive hole, and I scream again, nearly sobbing with how hard my cock throbs, trapped against the floor. And Orion forces himself the rest of the way in, bottoming out, his balls pressed against mine, his hips to my ass cheeks.

There’s something meditative about pain. It has a way of whiting out everything else, sharpening your senses and grounding you in a moment without escape. And that’s

exactly what I want. What I need . I'm more aware of every inch of my body than I've ever been, but I'm also completely untethered. Nothing feels real, but somehow, it's the most real anything has ever been. Orion's grunts and groans are a rhythmic chant, like a prayer. Even when the pain fades, leaving behind nothing but the stretch of him inside me, it's intense and perfect.

I gasp and moan right along with him, the slap of our skin with every thrust almost loud enough to drown out our wild cries, but not quite. I'm trembling and pulsing, thrashing, and screaming his name. At least I think I am. Or maybe I'm still just shouting "yes" over and over again as my insides tighten, my balls constrict, and my orgasm crashes over me in a blinding wave.

"Fuck, Elio ," Orion growls between clenched teeth, slamming into me harder as he loses his rhythm and starts to throb inside of me. The pulsing in his cock echoes the way my inner muscles flutter and clench around him.

Hot, sticky ropes of cum spill all over my skin and the floor beneath me, my orgasm going on and on and fucking on until I'm lightheaded and shaking. Orion collapses on top of me, and I feel like I am the puddle of cum on the filthy cement floor. Exactly the way he somehow knew I wanted.

Is this what love feels like?

### Chapter 20

ELIO

I jog up the steps to Orion's apartment building and stop short when I see the door propped open. I narrow my eyes into a scowl and wrench the door the rest of the way open. The neighborhood he's living in is bad enough on its own, never mind the shitty state of the building and his apartment. But the whole point of an entrance is to keep riff raff out, and if you're stupid enough to leave it wide open to the world, you're bound to get robbed. I stoop down and pick up the doorstop, stuffing it into my pocket before pulling the door closed behind me.

I glare at the peeling wallpaper on my way up to the second floor. Would Orion spank my ass if I suggested that he lose this place and move in with me? Maybe if I play up the financial angle, he'll go for it. If he lives with me, he can stop going to those underground fights to cover his brother's expenses. But, fuck, I want him to want to say yes. I want him to want to come home and soak in the bath with me after every fight and wake up next to me every morning. It sounds so goddamn domestic, and I want it so bad it's a little embarrassing.

I reach the landing of the second floor and blow out a breath, stopping for a second to drag my fingers through my hair to tame it, even though I'm sure it's already in place. The aching need in my gut to coax Orion back to my lair and keep him locked up there forever will have to wait. There are more important things to deal with tonight, unfortunately.

His door open before I even get the chance to knock, and I let a slow smile spread

over my lips.

“Waiting by the door for me, Boss?” I tease, taking a second to eat him up with my eyes. His hair is a wild mane tonight, and instead of his usual workout attire, he’s wearing a black t-shirt and a pair of jeans with a tattered hole in the left leg that gives the perfect peepshow to his muscular thigh, thick with dark blond hair.

He snorts, but doesn’t deny it, just steps aside to let me in. As soon as I cross the threshold, he wraps his arms around me and drags me close, letting the door swing closed behind me. He still smells like that shitty, cheap soap, and I’m tempted to just blurt out the idea of him moving in with me. I’ll buy him the most expensive soap on the market, whatever scent he likes. He nibbles down my throat and my cock swells to life immediately, a moan rising from my chest.

“Your text made it sound like this is more than just a social call,” he says, teasing his teeth along my skin.

“Unfortunately.” I sigh, grabbing a fistful of his shirt to keep him from going too far when he stops kissing me. “Dante came through for us. We’ve got most of what we need from Casimir’s emails.”

“And now it’s time to pay him a visit?” Orion guesses, and I nod.

He lets go of me, his face hardening a fraction as he drags his hand over his mouth.

“Do you have anything to drink?”

“Yeah.” He jerks his head for me to follow him.

Orion leads me to the small kitchenette attached to his living room. Without the distractions this time, I’m able to take a second to glance around the tiny apartment



while he opens the cabinet above the refrigerator to pull out a bottle of whiskey. Honestly, the place isn't a hell of a lot different from the mental picture I filled in from the quick look I got last time. It's obvious he does his best to keep it up, everything neat and tidy. But there's only so much you can shine a pile of shit.

Orion sets two shot glasses down on the counter in front of me and fills them both. Then he reaches for the one closest to himself and downs it in a quick gulp.

"So?" he prompts.

I pick up my glass and tip it back, letting the cheap whiskey burn on my tongue and all the way down my throat. It settles hot in my belly, but doesn't do much to take the edge off of what I have to tell him.

"You remember those girls at the motel?"

His eyes light with understanding immediately, connecting all the dots in under a second. His expression goes from curious and annoyed to darkly furious in the blink of an eye.

"That's what Casimir has been up to? Trafficking underaged girls?" He growls and pours us both a second shot.

"Looks like it. Selling them to pimps and pedos all over the city and fuck knows where else. Great way to make money if you're a goddamn monster without a fucking soul," I mutter, then I down the second shot, nudging the shot glass away when I set it down so I'm not tempted to have a third.

"What happens now?" Orion asks, his voice dipping lower than I thought was possible, raising goose bumps all down the back of my neck. "You get me to rough him up until he agrees to give you a cut of those profits? You put in a second

bathroom in your penthouse with all the money you make off of the kids he's buying and selling?"

I rear back like he's slapped me. Worse than if he slapped me.

"Jesus Christ, is that seriously what you think?" Maybe I do need that third shot after all. I reach for the bottle and skip the niceties of the glass this time, taking a swig straight from it and gasping at the burn that doesn't do near enough to cauterize the way Orion just cut me.

He dips his gaze and sets his jaw, quiet for a few seconds before he jerks his head back and forth. "Fuck, no, I don't. I'm sorry." He lets out a long breath. "I'm just... That's so fucked up. Kids ? What kind of inhuman garbage is willing to do that?"

"The worst kind," I answer darkly. "As for what happens now, Xaviaro is staking out his apartment. He texted me a few minutes ago to let me know Casimir is home, alone, and if that changes, he's going to let me know that too. Dante was able to find emails back and forth with his supplier, some Russian prick. But what we don't know is when the next shipment is due and whether Casimir was working alone in Wildcliff."

"So, we're going to go over there and beat some answers out of him?" The eager edge in Orion's voice this time would be concerning if it weren't so fucking hot.

"You're off the hook, Boss. Unless you actually want in on this. Xav can handle it. Getting answers out of Casimir the hard way would be like foreplay for him and Sparrow. Lorenzo is already on his way there too. Something this big going on under his nose in his city? He wants to see it handled."

The muscle in his jaw works, and he stares at our empty shot glasses for a few silent seconds. Maybe weighing the price of his soul, or maybe coming to terms with the

fact that there's no such thing, and that right and wrong are all just shades of gray. When he looks up again, the determination is clear as day in his eyes.

"I want in."

ORION

"This feels like overkill," Xaviaro says, the five of us standing shoulder to shoulder in the elevator. I feel a little underdressed, sandwiched between the three well-dressed Morettis in their pricey black suits and Italian shoes.

I glance over at Sparrow, leaning casually against the back wall of the elevator, dressed in a leather jacket and a pair of jeans that look about as high end as mine. That is to say, full of holes and possibly hand-me-downs. At least I'm not the only one who passed on the dress code. He flashes a toothy smirk at Xaviaro's comment, meeting his eyes through the distorted reflection on the metallic walls.

"Who in their right mind would pass up on the fun of gutting a human trafficker?"

Xaviaro's answering smile definitely gives weight to Elio's earlier foreplay theory.

Lorenzo sighs. "It's not supposed to be fun."

Xaviaro's expression returns to something icy and stoic, and he nods. "Right. It's not a game, it's a job," he agrees. But I don't miss the wink he shoots his boyfriend when Lorenzo isn't looking anymore.

The doors slide open, and we all file out. I hang back until everyone else is out, falling into step at the back of the group. I'm not sure what I was thinking coming along. They don't need me here, and if I'm being honest, I don't know for sure that I have the stomach for it. But the burning rage in my gut keeps my feet moving under

me. Maybe we didn't know we were starting something the night Elio took me to that motel, but I need to see it through now.

"Orion," Lorenzo barks my name, and my pulse skyrockets.

"Uh, yeah?" I answer, picking up my pace until I'm at the front of the group instead of the back, right in step with the Don himself, eating up the distance from the elevator to Casimir's apartment at record speed.

"I'm going to knock on the door, and when he answers, you're going to knock him out. Can you handle that?" His voice is calm and quiet in the kind of way that feels powerful, like every word he says holds weight.

I give a jerky nod. If there's one thing I can do, it's KO someone. "Yeah."

"Good," Lorenzo says crisply, stopping right in front of Casimir's door.

He raises his fist, and everything feels like it's slowing down and coming into sharper focus, just like the seconds before a fight. My senses are all cranked up to eleven with the adrenaline pumping through me. The rap of his knuckles against the wood echoes in my ears like thunder, or maybe that's my pulse. Everything else fades around me. If Casimir hesitates to open the door, I don't know about it. If anyone else says a word, it's lost on me. I'm focused on exactly one thing, and the second the door swings open, I act on pure instinct, cocking my arm back and slamming my fist directly into his face.

He stumbles backward with the force and then crumples to the ground. If everything was moving at half speed a few seconds ago, it's moving twice as fast as usual now to catch back up. Elio, Xaviaro, and Sparrow rush past Lorenzo and I into the apartment. Elio and Xaviaro pick up the unconscious body of hefty, middle-aged Casimir by his arms, one on either side of him. They don't bother with his legs, settling for dragging

him down the hallway, deeper into the apartment.

I'm not sure how many times they've run this exact play, or if they're just a well-oiled machine, but they move around each other like they all know exactly what they're meant to be doing. Sparrow pulls a chair out from the kitchen table, and Xaviaro and Elio drop Casimir's limp body into it.

"Get the blinds," Lorenzo says, and since everyone else is busy, I'm assuming he's talking to me.

I hustle past them to pull the blinds closed on each of the kitchen windows. When I turn around, Sparrow is whistling a jaunty tune and using a length of rope he must have brought with him to tie Casimir up, binding him to the chair and tying his wrists and ankles. I cock my head and watch his technique with interest. He's clearly a hell of a lot more advanced than a makeshift belt restraint. Maybe I can ask him for some tips later.

Elio catches my eye and waggles his eyebrows. I put on a stern expression and shake my head, just to toy with him. It shouldn't feel this natural to flirt with my boyfriend over the unconscious body of a sex trafficker. Maybe I'm more like the monsters than I wanted to admit to myself. Did Jack see that in me? Is that why he was so adamant that I stay away from all this?

Sparrow finishes with the knots on Casimir's ankles and gets back to his feet gracefully. He glances over at Lorenzo, and the boss gives a single nod. That feral smile I saw in the elevator spreads across the terrifying twink's mouth again, and he gives the unconscious man a light slap on the cheek.

"Rise and shine, fuckface," Sparrow singsongs. Casimir grunts and blinks slowly, looking dazed at first, and then fucking terrified when he sees the five of us standing around him. "Look what we have here, Casimir, it's the consequences of your

actions.”

Casimir whips his head around, trying to get a better look at Elio and Enzo, standing slightly behind him on either side. He jerks his arms, testing the knot Sparrow tied around his wrists, then flails, rocking the chair underneath him.

Elio puts a foot on the chair to steady it and leans over with his arms resting on his raised knee. He’s wearing that same friendly smile that’s equal parts unsettling and weirdly hot.

“Hey there, friend. Thanks for having us.”

“I’ve been paying,” he says in a hurry. “Every month, right on time.”

“We know,” Lorenzo says. “And that’s exactly what made us suspicious.”

“Suspicious?”

“It’s a big, fancy word that means we don’t buy your bullshit,” Sparrow explains.

“I paid ,” Casimir says again. “What the fuck do you care where the money is coming from?”

Elio gives a low, threatening chuckle, and Xaviaro steps forward, wearing that grim, blank expression of his.

“Let’s cut to the chase. We know you’re trafficking kids, and that’s not something the Morettis are going to stand for. Now, you’re going to tell us when the next shipment is coming in and if this is a solo project you’ve been working on here in Wildcliff or not.”

The cagey look of fear in Casimir's eyes turns even more wild, his expression hardening with a stubborn set of his jaw.

"I'm not telling you shit," he spits.

"Oh goodie. That's what I was hoping you would say." Sparrow reaches into his jacket and pulls out a knife as long as his forearm, one edge jagged, with shark-like teeth. Casimir's eyes go wide. "Do me a favor and hold his head still for me, O?" Sparrow asks, cocking his head to one side and studying our captive, like he's an artist sizing up a blank canvas, trying to decide the most interesting way to paint it crimson.

I move between Elio and Lorenzo to stand behind Casimir, my hands on either side of his head to hold it still. Sparrow brings the knife to the man's cheek, pressing the flat steel surface of it against his skin. He wails and tries to buck, but all that accomplishes is bringing the tip of the blade closer to his eye.

"If I tell you, they'll kill me," he sputters.

"Cassie, sweetie, we're going to kill you," Sparrow says patiently.

"Telling us what we want to know or not is just going to decide how much you suffer first," Elio says solemnly.

He tries to thrash again, but I hold him still. It feels like an out-of-body experience. I'm me, but not me. Maybe I'm just a new version of me, watching as Sparrow presses the edge of the blade into his skin, slicing shallowly, just enough to draw out a trickle of blood.

"I'm working alone," Casimir yelps. "Some Russian with a name I can't pronounce, Nik-something..."

“Nikandr,” Lorenzo supplies, sounding bored by this whole thing. “We know about him.”

“Right,” Casimir agrees. “He showed up at The Starlight and made me an offer. He would ship the merchandise—”

“Kids,” I interject roughly, digging my fingers into his temples a little harder. “They’re not fucking merchandise, they’re kids .”

“I was desperate,” he says, trying to defend himself.

Sparrow scoffs and cuts his other cheek, not bothering to go slow or shallow this time, splitting it open deep enough that a river of blood spills out and cascades down onto his shirt. Casimir wails again.

“Nobody here gives a fuck.” Sparrow puts the tip of his knife under the man’s chin. “That’s one answer down. You’re working alone. Now, when’s the next shipment?”

“As far as I know, I am. But do you have any idea how much money that fucker makes? If you kill me, he’ll just get another middleman in Wildcliff.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Elio says. “We’re going to make sure we send a message loud and clear to Nikandr about who’s in charge in this city, and exactly what we’ll tolerate.”

“Ticktock, Cas.” Sparrow presses the tip of the knife harder against his Adam’s apple. “When’s the shipment?”

Casimir’s breathing speeds up, and I can tell the exact moment he realizes he’s not getting out of here alive. The tension in him breaks, and his whole body sags.



“Tuesday. One-forty-five in the morning. A freighter is going to pull into the docks and there’s supposed to be two dozen girls on board.”

“What about crew?” Lorenzo asks. “How much muscle and how armed are they?”

“I don’t know. Usually about ten guys with sidearms, from what I’ve seen.” Casimir swallows loudly and Sparrow pulls the knife back from his throat. He smirks and pats his cheek.

“Good boy.”

Xaviaro steps around him again, reaching into his suit jacket and pulling out a snub-nosed revolver.

“Move,” he says, and it takes me a second to realize he’s talking to me.

Elio snags my arm and pulls me towards him, off to the side, away from Casimir.

“We good?” Xaviaro’s eyes flicker to Lorenzo momentarily, and he gives another single nod.

As embarrassing as it is, I turn and duck my head into the crook of Elio’s neck, flinching at the resounding pop that echoes through the room, followed by an almost unnatural silence. Elio strokes my hair with his fingers, and no one says a word for a few seconds. I drag in a couple of shaky breaths and manage to straighten myself up again. I’m expecting teasing looks from everyone else, but no one seems to notice or care that I don’t quite have the stomach for murder that they do. Sparrow and Xaviaro are already jumping into action, untying Casimir’s limp body and preparing for disposal.

“Come on, Boss. We’re done here,” Elio says, giving me a little nudge.

“Shouldn’t we help?” My throat feels thick as I ask the question, hoping he’ll say no.

“We’re fine.” Sparrow waves us off while Xaviaro mutters something under his breath about laundry that I don’t quite understand.

Lorenzo is right behind us, leaving the two of them to cleanup duty. Elio’s arm is around my shoulders, and I breathe a little easier with each step we take towards the elevators. By the time we reach it, it’s like nothing ever happened. My heart is beating steadily, and there isn’t an ounce of guilt weighing on my conscience.

“You did good, Orion,” Lorenzo says when the doors slide closed behind us. “I wasn’t completely sure if you would fit in with the family the way Elio needs, but you surprised me.”

“I don’t know about that,” I say softly. “I definitely don’t have the flair for it the way Sparrow does.”

“Those two are freaks though,” Elio argues.

Lorenzo’s lips twitch with an almost-smile. “I believe Alessio would call them ‘couple goals.’”

“They’re not going to fuck in that guy’s blood or anything, are they?” I lower my voice, almost afraid to ask.

Elio chuckles. “Honestly, with those two, who the fuck knows.”

“It’s something I prefer not to ask about,” Lorenzo agrees.

The doors open in the lobby, and Elio slips his hand into mine, twining our fingers together.

“Come home with me?” It sounds like he’s asking me to stay the night with him, but there’s a deeper hope in his words that almost feels like he’s asking for more than that.

Jack is back at Shady Oaks, and I can’t think of anything in the world that would tempt me to go back to my own empty bed tonight. Or ever, if I’m being honest with myself.

Elio likes it when I boss him around. Maybe I’ll boss him into inviting me for more than just tonight. Forever sounds like it might be long enough.

### Chapter 21

#### ELIO

Waiting for Orion to enter the ring hits differently when I'm able to drag my tongue along my bottom lip and still taste his mouth. Everyone in the building is chanting his name, but when he steps out into the ring, I'm the one his eyes seek out immediately. He only keeps his attention on me for half a second, maybe less, but it's long enough to heat up every inch of me. It's long enough for me to catch the way his expression flits from focused to intense to determined. The contempt that used to burn in his eyes whenever his gaze landed on me is long gone. Lucky for me, he was wrong. It wasn't the way he hated me that I got off on, it's the way he sees all the way down to my core. He saw the ugly, nasty parts back then, when everyone else was too busy kissing my ass to save their own. Now he sees everything else too. At least, I think he does.

Greg Nelson enters the ring, and the crowd goes wild all over again with a mix of cheers and boos. After Orion found out that the guys were afraid of retribution from me if they beat him, he asked to set up a rematch against Nelson. No surprise, the kid was all for it.

Orion faces him and mouths something that looks like, "Don't hold back." Nelson's face hardens to reflect Orion's fierce determination, and he gives a single nod. I don't know if he was holding back last time, but I get why Orion needs the rematch.

The bell chimes and as soon as Greg Nelson throws his first punch, it's clear he has no plans to take it easy tonight. He's coming out of the gate swinging, and Orion is

ready for it. He ducks and weaves, dodging eighty percent of the initial attack. I've always been drawn in by the savage brutality that follows, but tonight I'm mesmerized by this as well. He moves like he's weightless, as if his feet don't even need to touch the mat.

The moment is shattered as Nelson takes another swing and connects this time. Hard . His fist slams into the side of Orion's jaw, causing him to stumble back. My stomach knots and I hold my breath, expecting Orion to recover and come back twice as violent, ready to teach this kid who he's in the ring with. He makes a comeback, but not without a few missed steps and too many chances for Nelson to get a couple more shots in. I grimace at the fleshy thud of punches and kicks that only ever seem to turn my stomach when Orion's on the receiving end.

"Oh, shit," Alessio murmurs next to me, his voice barely audible over the roar of the crowd.

Instead of cheering Orion's name, the chorus of " Nelson, Nelson, Nelson! " only seems to grow louder and louder.

He isn't giving up easily, but it doesn't look like Nelson needs him to.

"Goddamn, we're about to clean up tonight." Salvatore stands up, his eyes fixed eagerly on the fight, just like every other person in the arena.

"Well, fuck. I guess I should have placed a bet on Nelson tonight. I could've hung up my thong for good," Dante says from the seat on Sal's other side.

He didn't seem all that thrilled when the two of them showed up together, but he obviously follows the UFL more than he let on, so I'm guessing his general lack of enthusiasm was more about being stuck under Sal's watchful eye until after we deal with the shipment this week.

“Would you assholes shut the fuck up,” I growl without tearing my eyes off of the ring where Orion and Nelson are grappling on the ground now.

I can barely follow the flurry of movement or who’s pinning who at any given moment. It’s nothing but elbows and fists, legs locked around each other as they fight for supremacy. It’s the exact mix of mildly sexual and wholly violent that attracted me to MMA to begin with, but right now my dick isn’t even close to hard.

And then it’s over. I almost feel like I missed a step. One second the air is vibrating with shouts and cheers, and then... silence . Orion’s pinned under Nelson, his face bloody and his chest heaving as he taps his hand against the hard mat. Everyone in the arena seems to hold their breath at once, and then the bell rings, the announcer shouts Greg Nelson’s name to declare him the winner, and the screaming starts all over again, so loud it’s deafening.

Orion Barros just lost the fight.

## ORION

I feel dazed. I guess a few dozen blows to the head will do that to a guy. But I think it’s more than that. I lost my first UFL fight. After all this time, and everything that’s happened, my undefeated streak is over.

The press clears out of the locker room, and I sink down onto the bench, mopping the blood and sweat off of my face with a towel, waiting for the crushing feeling of the loss to wash over me. It’s not just a loss, it’s everything it means. I’ve known for a long time that I’m aging out, and this is a brutal reminder that I’m not as quick, not as indestructible as I once was.

I drag in a deep breath, and, surprisingly, I feel more at peace than I have in as long as I can remember. Maybe ever . Every punch I’ve thrown, every hit I’ve taken since

the beginning, they've all felt necessary for survival. I don't want this to be my only option anymore though. Maybe it doesn't have to be.

I hear the door swing open, and I grin into the towel. I dab my face a little more, then toss the towel aside and look over my shoulder to see Elio stepping into the locker room. He follows the trajectory of my used towel with his eyes as it sails towards the laundry hamper, a half smile twisted on his lips. Then he looks back at me, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

"How are you feeling, Boss?" He sounds so somber, like we're at a funeral.

I snort a laugh and stand up. "I'm fine. Can't win 'em all, and if I had to lose to anyone, I'm glad it was Nelson. He's a good kid with an impressive career ahead of him."

"Uh-huh." Elio's shoes squeak against the linoleum floor as he comes closer. "And what about the non-press, no bullshit response?"

I shrug. "I really am fine. I'm surprised too, but there it is."

He doesn't stop walking until he's right in front of me, bringing his fingertips up to ghost them over my swollen cheek. I don't wince at the twinge of pain that jolts through me with the touch, I just wait quietly while he catalogs the scrapes and bruises, his gaze darkening at each one. When he reaches my split lip, I turn my head and press a kiss against the inside of his palm.

That seems to break the spell. The vengeful expression etched onto Elio's face melts away, and he pulls his hand back to replace it with his mouth, running his tongue over the cut on my lip as we kiss.

"What do you say we go home and get in the bath? I'll give you a massage and a

consolation blowjob.” He tangles his fingers in my loose, sweat-drenched hair and presses himself up against me, completely unconcerned with my blood and sweat ruining his suit.

Home . I haven’t brought up that fleeting thought I had after we left Casimir’s apartment about the two of us moving in together, but maybe I don’t have to. I wrap my fist around Elio’s tie, feeling the ache in my knuckles from the fight, and I kiss him deeper. After a lifetime of fighting for every fucking thing, it feels damn good to have this come so easy. I chuckle against his lips. Maybe easy isn’t the right word to use when it comes to Elio, but I don’t have a better one.

“That a yes, Boss?” he asks with a laugh when I finally release him.

“Yeah. But I want to make a stop first. If you’re up for it.”

“I’m always up for it.”

If that’s not a true statement, I don’t know what is. I could take him anywhere and he would be game. He trusted me before I ever gave him a reason to. He let me into his world, and it’s time I finally let him the rest of the way into mine.

Twenty minutes later, we’re standing outside of Shady Oaks, my mouth dry and my stomach in knots as Elio stands next to me, holding my hand.

“I haven’t told him about you yet,” I confess, buying another few seconds while I work up the courage to actually take him in.

“We can lie about the mob thing if it helps,” he offers, and I bark out a laugh.

“You think he doesn’t know what you look like?” I arch an eyebrow at him.

“Besides, your suit screams Mafia. He’d know with one look.”



“Fair enough.” He smooths out his suit jacket absently with his free hand. “We doing this?”

I drag in a breath, then nod. “Yeah, we’re doing this.”

The receptionist gives Elio a curious look while I sign in, but if she knows who he is, she doesn’t have the guts to say anything about it. Either that, or she’s just smart enough not to. I’ll give her credit and assume it’s the latter. I wonder what it’s like to have people be scared shitless of you everywhere you go. Obviously, it’s a necessity in his line of work, but does it ever weigh on him?

That question feels downright stupid when I think about how hard he gets off on being ignored and humiliated in bed. He’s desperate to be owned and spanked and called a pathetic slut because he’s not allowed to be those things with anyone else. The realization hits me like a rogue punch, knocking me off balance for a few seconds. I look over at Elio and my heart swells until it’s too big to even sit right inside my chest anymore.

He cocks his head. “Everything okay, Boss?” he asks, dropping his voice low.

I clear my throat. “Great.” I grab his hand again and tug it, putting authority behind the action and savoring the way his shoulders relax from something that simple.

No, things aren’t going to be easy being in love with a mafioso, but it sure as hell feels right. Falling for Elio was as inevitable as giving up my undefeated streak was. He’s the knockout punch I didn’t know I needed until he sauntered into my life and left me seeing goddamn stars.

I lead him down the hall, stopping at Jack’s door to knock. I probably should have warned him I was bringing company, but it’s not like that would have made this introduction any easier. To my surprise, the door swings open on its own, and a pretty

blond woman gives me a shy smile. She looks familiar, but I can't quite place her. She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, then looks back over her shoulder into my brother's room.

"See you tomorrow, Jacky." The sweet lilt in her voice makes my teeth ache and brings a smile to my bruised lips at the same time. If anyone needs a little toothache sweetness, it's Jack.

She slips past me and I stand speechless for a few seconds while the pieces fall into place.

"The nurse?" Both my eyebrows shoot up.

He hides a smile under a stern glare. "Her name is Sarah." He clears his throat and a familiar, brotherly sort of shit-eating grin spreads over his face. "I can't believe you're showing your face here after a loss li—" Jack stops mid-sentence when his eyes finally land on Elio next to me.

"Yeah, Nelson has some fucking heat in those fists of his." I rub my bruised cheek for emphasis, chuckling. My heart is beating a mile a minute, and my tongue feels too big for my mouth, but Jack deserves the truth, and Elio deserves to meet the only family I have. "I want you to meet someone."

"What the fuck, Orion?" Jack mutters, darting a glance between Elio and me, then down to our joined hands. "Are you dating Elio fucking Moretti?"

"Elio Geppetto Moretti, actually. Don't go spreading that around though," Elio corrects.

I bark out a surprised laugh. "Are you serious? Geppetto?"

He bristles. "It's a family name."

"Any cousins named Pinocchio?"

"Don't make me hurt you." His threat doesn't carry an ounce of weight, but I play along, forgetting my brother for half a second as I growl and drop Elio's hand, then grab him by his tie before he has the chance to blink.

"I don't think you want to play that game with me. I may have gotten my ass kicked tonight, but that just means I'm all the more frustrated and in need of an outlet," I say, and he visibly shivers.

"What the fuck ?" Jack says again, his tone more dark than amused. "Seriously, bro, what the actual fuck?"

I drop my grip on Elio, and he stumbles a little, then straightens his tie and steps towards my brother's bed.

"I would apologize for your brother, but I assume you already know he's a fucking heathen. I'm glad we're getting the chance to meet now that you're conscious and don't have tubes sticking out every which way." He's all charm, grabbing a chair and pulling it over to Jack's bed, then plopping himself down in it.

"You were at the hospital?" Jack frowns.

"Only once or twice. Your brother was worried about you." He says it casually, but Jack still winces. If Elio notices the guilt that flashes over my brother's face, he doesn't draw attention to it. But he doesn't linger on the topic either. "You must get sick of looking at these four walls day in and day out. You like football? I could get us all tickets to a game."

Elio is trying way too hard to impress my brother, and goddammit, that too-big feeling is back inside of my chest, making me want to say embarrassing things.

Jack narrows his eyes suspiciously, his mouth curving downward into a frown.

“You think taking me to a football game is all it’s going to take for me to be okay with the idea of my brother dating a mobster?” He whips his gaze in my direction again, hurt and fear dancing in his eyes.

Elio leans back in the chair a little and crosses his ankle over his knee, silently assessing Jack for a second. “Would season tickets do it?” he barbers.

My brother’s expression is stoic for a few seconds, then it cracks, and he cackles with what sounds like reluctant laughter.

“Dammit, you’re not supposed to be funny. You’re corrupting my brother, you prick.” Jack’s voice is raw, making my chest ache.

“Your brother is the biggest pain in the ass I’ve ever met. I think you and I both know that he doesn’t do a fucking thing he doesn’t want to.” Elio looks over at me, his expression dripping with the same awed affection he always wears when I get rough with him. “And the last thing I want to do is corrupt him.”

“What do you want then?” Jack demands, his voice low and menacing, sounding every bit the protective older brother I thought died the night he was paralyzed.

“Whatever he’s willing to give me,” Elio answers. “This isn’t a game to me though.” He clears his throat, looking right at my brother still. “I love him.”

His words send an electric jolt through me. They root me in place and make my skin feel hot and cold at the same time. They ring in my ears, along with the steady thud of

my pounding heart. Their conversation keeps going without any pause before I can find my footing and respond to his casual declaration.

“How...” Jack grits his teeth and shakes his head. “How the hell did the two of you even meet?” He glares at me again. “You did the one fucking thing you promised not to, didn’t you? You took out a fucking loan.”

Heat creeps into my cheeks and I nod. “I didn’t have a choice, man. I’m doing the best I fucking can, but...” I give a weak shrug and Jack’s rage crumples.

“But I’m a useless fucking lump, doing nothing but draining your bank account dry every month,” he finishes the sentence a hell of a lot more harshly than I ever would have.

“No,” I say firmly. “You’re my brother , and I would do any goddamn thing in the world to take care of you. The same way you put everything on the line to take care of me.”

His jaw ticks, and he lets his head fall back against his pillow fully. “I fucking hate this.”

“Me too.” I put a hand on his shoulder and squeeze, even though I know he can’t feel much.

Jack huffs and all three of us are quiet for several long minutes before my brother finally turns his attention back to Elio.

“I don’t get out much,” Jack responds to the offer for football tickets, glossing over the rest of the conversation to aim the spotlight instead at a point of contention we’ve gone back and forth over for years now.

“He lets his pride keep him stuck in this damn bed,” I explain roughly.

“I don’t need you pushing me around in a wheelchair like some kind of fucking invalid.” We’ve had the argument so many times, I know his lines by heart, and I’m sure he knows mine too.

“You’re my brother,” I growl for a second time.

“Exactly,” he snaps.

“You can move your head. Don’t they make wheelchairs you can control that way?” Elio interjects.

“Yeah, and they cost a fortune,” I answer. “He just needs to get over himself and let me push his damn chair.”

“No,” Jack says stubbornly.

“Let’s drop it,” I suggest. It’s not an argument that’s going to be resolved tonight.

Jack lets the topic go, and Elio asks him about movies without skipping a beat. That’s a much safer subject, and it turns out they share a passion for obscure indie films. Elio’s words echo in my head for the rest of the visit, keeping my pulse quick and my stomach nervous. Luckily, they don’t need much input from me to keep the conversation going. Not that I would have much to add even if I wasn’t reeling. I haven’t had time to watch a movie in years.

When they’ve exhausted the topic of movies, Elio notices the bumblebee tattoo on my brother’s arm.

“Are you super into bees, or what?” he asks.

Jack looks down at the tattoo and I tense, waiting for his reaction. Since his injury, I've done everything I can to avoid the topic of his former life, our former life. It feels like it's always lurking around the edges of every conversation though, just waiting to deliver a knockout blow to us both. A nostalgic kind of smile flutters on his face though.

"Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee. It's Muhammad Ali," he explains.

"So do you have a butterfly somewhere else?" Elio asks.

My brother laughs. "Nope. Check your boyfriend's ass for that one."

I cringe and Elio swivels in his chair to look at me with wide eyes and an amused grin.

"Are you serious? You have a butterfly tattoo on your ass?"

"I can't believe you never noticed." I chuckle.

"I'm usually pretty distracted when you're naked, Boss." His voice dips low, and Jack makes an exaggerated gagging sound.

"Please, spare me the details of your sex life."

The tension eases out of me, and I manage to breathe without knots in my chest. Maybe I've been trying too hard to avoid talking about the past. Maybe Jack needs a little bit of normal from me to feel like his whole life didn't end that night.

We launch into a fresh topic of conversation, and when Jack starts to get tired an hour or so later, I put a hand on Elio's shoulder and jerk my head towards the door.

“Do you mind giving us a second?”

“Sure thing.” Elio stands up and slips out, leaving me alone with my brother.

“Alright, give it to me.” I make a bring it on gesture with my hands.

“You’re all grown up, O. You make your own decisions.” He sounds tired and resigned, but not angry. That’s more unsettling than if he just flat-out yelled at me.

“Since when?” I tease, and he snorts.

“Since a long damn time ago. If you like him, then he must be a good guy. Or... well... maybe not good , but...” His mouth twists in a wry smile and I make an amused sound in my throat.

“Yeah, that pretty much sums it up,” I agree. “A lot of this shit is just so much more complicated than I wanted it to be, you know?”

“I know. I’m not mad, I promise.”

I let out a breath that’s been stuck in my throat since before we even walked in here tonight. “Thanks.” I lean over and kiss Jack on the forehead. “I love you, man.”

“You too. Now get out of here so I can sleep. Lying motionless for years has really taken it out of me,” he says dryly.

I ruffle his hair, and even if it’s the millionth time in five years, I still miss the way he used to take a swing at me when I would do it.

“And don’t think this whole thing distracted me from Sarah ,” I say with a grin. “I want details when I stop by tomorrow.”



He gives a jerky nod, a soft smile twitching on his lips. Shit might not be okay with us right now, but it will be. We're family. We'll sort it out.

Elio is waiting for me in the hallway, leaning against the opposite wall, scrolling through his phone. He looks up and pockets it as soon as I step out though, like he was just trying not to eavesdrop while he waited. He smiles and I close the space between us, putting on a stern look.

“Wha—” He starts to ask, but I cut him off with a hard kiss, stopping his words and busting open the cut on my lip again.

His body softens as I press him up against the wall and own his mouth with my lips and tongue, drinking him in.

“You keep stealing my thunder,” I rumble when I break the kiss.

“Oh yeah?”

I nod. “Yeah. You told me you wanted me before I could work it out on my own. You decided we were dating and told me like it was a fact. And now, you're spouting off to my brother about being in love with me while I was still sorting through it in my head.” My voice is low and menacing, but Elio's eyes light up like I'm saying the most romantic shit in the world.

“Are you going to spank me, Boss?” he purrs.

“Yeah, I'm going to spank you. Right after we stop by my place, and I pack a suitcase. We can go back for the rest of my shit next week.”

“The rest of your shit?”

“I’m moving in with you before you steal my thunder on that one too.”

A slow smile spreads over his lips. “Sounds good, Boss.”

“Good.” I dip my head close to his, brushing the tips of our noses together. “And I love you too, Brat.”

### Chapter 22

#### ORION

I reach up and tug at the stiff collar of the dress shirt that's feeling more and more like a noose around my neck with every passing second. Even that simple motion makes me more aware of how restricted my mobility feels, with the cuff links around my wrists holding the shirt in place no matter how I squirm or tug.

"My suit looks good on you," Elio says, glancing at me for just a second with a flirtatious grin on his lips before he returns his attention to the road ahead.

"I feel like I'm being strangled," I grumble, shifting in my seat and fiddling with the tie around my neck. It's the same tie I've wrapped my fist around more than once to call my bratty mobster to heel.

He chuckles. "I guess I'm too fucked in the head to see the problem. But I'm glad you prefer to be on the other end of that equation."

I rumble a laugh and force myself to stop fidgeting. "I still think I could have gotten away with dressing normal ." We spent half an hour arguing about it before we left the apartment, and for once, Elio refused to back down. I guess that should tell me how important it is that I get this right tonight, but I'm too uncomfortable to admit that. The nerves dancing in my gut aren't helping things either.

"You know why we have to do it this way, Boss," he says patiently, switching his headlights off as we turn down the road that leads to the docks. "You need to look the

part so they'll let you on the boat. You get on, assess the situation, and get us the information so we know what we're up against."

"I know." I jerk my head up and down, bouncing my knee.

Elio slows to a stop in an out-of-the-way area, hidden by a row of warehouses. Lorenzo is already here, standing stoically with his hands in his pockets next to his car. It's a relief to get out of the car, even if it does mean the doomsday clock ticking in my head is inching closer to midnight with every breath. He goes around to pop open the trunk, and I join him because no matter how many times we've gone over this plan, I still have no fucking clue what I'm supposed to be doing. All the information is there in my head, I'm just hoping that when the bell rings, my instincts will take over like they always do.

Except this isn't just two guys stepping into a ring to wail on each other for money. This is life or death for every single one of us. One slipup and it's over. I let out a shaky breath as Elio snatches a pistol out of his trunk and then turns to me. He steals my usual move, wrapping his hand around my tie and closing the space between us until our noses are touching and we're sharing the same air with every breath.

"It's going to be fine," he says, like he can read my mind. Except it's a hell of a lot more likely that he's just picking up on my jittery body language. "You know how to use this?" He presses the handle of the gun into my palm, and I wrap my fingers around it with a nod.

"I know how to use it." Mostly, anyway. Enough that I'm sure I can figure it out in a pinch.

"I'm hoping you won't need to, but I'm not sending you in there unarmed." We've gone over this a hundred times too, but there's something soothing about hearing it again. "Your focus is on getting the information we need and keeping the kids safe

once shit starts to go down.”

“Got it.” I sound a hell of a lot more confident than I feel.

While I tuck the gun into the hidden holster, Elio pulls a heavy tie clip out of his pocket and attaches it to my tie. He takes a second to adjust it, then pulls out his phone and taps the screen until his own shadowy face fills the screen from an odd perspective. He grins.

“It’s working.” His voice echoes quietly through the speaker on his phone too, confirming that the audio is working as well.

“Bit ironic, isn’t it? Wearing a wire for the mob.” I chuckle.

He snorts in agreement before he catches my mouth in a kiss. Even though he’s the one to initiate it, he melts into the submissive role immediately, softening to my greedy, demanding rhythm. A frantic feeling rises inside my chest, clawing its way up my throat until I’m surprised it doesn’t burst out of me, shredding me like bloodied confetti. This could be the last time I kiss him.

“It’s going to be fine,” he murmurs again, and I cling to that hope. I have to believe him, or I’ll never pull this off.

The sound of more engines rumbles through the night. I reluctantly let Elio go and look over his shoulder to see two more expensive cars coming down the road with their headlights off. They pull up next to us, Sparrow and Xaviaro getting out of one while Alessio and Salvatore get out of the other.

Alessio bounces on his toes, grinning ear to ear as he approaches us.

“It’s been a while since we got to whip our guns out like this.” He rubs his hands

together like he's about to dig into a plate of ribs rather than murder a dozen Russians.

"Speak for yourself," Xaviaro says, sounding bored.

"I trust Dante is somewhere secure?" Lorenzo asks, joining us.

Salvatore nods and opens his mouth, presumably to give details about where he left his charge to ensure he couldn't tip off the Russians or anyone else for a quick payday. But before he can say anything, his trunk pops open unexpectedly.

"What the fuck?" Alessio mutters.

"Christine?" Sparrow says with a laugh. I frown and cock my head. "It's a Stephen King book about a haunted car."

There's the sound of crunching gravel and all five mobsters pull their guns.

"Jesus, that was a tighter fit than it looked." Dante's voice echoes through the quiet night as loudly as the car engines did a few minutes ago. "Can I get a 'that's what he said?'"

"Excellent work securing him," Lorenzo mutters, tucking his gun away.

"I tied him up and told him to stay put," Salvatore says defensively.

Dante snorts, coming around the car into full view. He's fully dressed for a change, in jeans and a black hooded sweatshirt. It's almost jarring to see him in something other than booty shorts, without a hint of makeup or glitter in sight.

"Remind me to teach you how to tie a proper knot sometime," Dante offers with a

smirk.

Alessio cackles.

“You used a hitch knot, didn’t you? Rookie move, Sal.” Sparrow tuts.

“This isn’t a plus one kind of situation,” Lorenzo says coolly, directing his attention to Dante. “Why don’t you climb back into the trunk until we’re finished here.”

“No.” It’s one simple word on his lips, but a couple of the guys audibly gasp, then try to cover the sound with fake coughing.

“No?” Lorenzo repeats, his voice low and dangerous.

Dante’s face hardens and he pulls himself up to his full height, which admittedly is not all that impressive without the platform boots he often wears at Wild.

“Look, I’ll stay out of the way, I won’t fuck anything up for you, I just...” He crosses his arms and glances in the direction of the docks, even though the view is blocked by the warehouses. “This is personal, and I need to know that those kids get out safely. If you want me back in that trunk, you’re going to have to put a bullet in my head first.”

Lorenzo’s nostrils flare, but his face otherwise remains neutral. “Stay the fuck out of the way, or I won’t hesitate to shoot you.”

Dante nods. “Deal.”

Over the next few minutes, another dozen men whose names I don’t know show up in small groups. Soldiers . I remember Elio using the word at least once before. This is the Moretti army—at least, part of it. How many men work for Lorenzo? Doing his bidding, keeping the dregs of this city in line, and collecting money to pad his

pockets.

It's easier to spend a few minutes musing about that rather than dwelling on what's to come. Lorenzo looks at his watch, and that seems to be the signal that it's time to move.

"You ready for this?" Elio asks, but the question feels rhetorical. It's zero hour, I can't back out now.

"I'm ready."

I manage to get my feet moving on muscle memory alone, the entirety of my body in a numb state as I make my way around the warehouse. There's a medium sized cargo ship pulling into the dock right on schedule.

"Just walk right up and act like you belong there. Remember, you're a rich pedo, which means you've convinced yourself that you're entitled to any damn thing you want. "

Elio's advice last night while we lay in bed plays on a loop in my mind, so that's exactly what I do. I walk right up to the ship, not stopping until the dude guarding the ramp pulls a gun on me. I hold my hands up and put on my best relaxed smile.

"Hi, I'm hoping I have the right boat. Casimir sent me. He told me to ask for Nikandr."

The man eyes me suspiciously, keeping his pistol pointed at me.

"Where is Casimir?" he asks in a thick Russian accent. Yup, we've got the right boat. Not that there are a whole hell of a lot of them pulling into dock in the middle of the night like this to begin with.



“He had personal business to take care of, so he delegated to me. I’ve got the money right here.” I nod towards my pocket, and he lowers his gun a fraction of an inch and grunts.

My pulse is a frantic drumbeat in my ears, every inch of my body hyperaware of exactly how fast I’m moving as I reach for the cash, and the bullet that’s bound to tear through me if he gets the slightest idea that I’m lying. I pull out the rolls of bills and hold them up so he can see. He grunts again and extends his open palm.

“Cas told me not to hand over the money until I see that the merchandise is all present and accounted for.”

He huffs, and finally tucks his gun away. “Come.” He jerks his head for me to follow him.

I scurry the rest of the way up the ramp. The nerves that had me twitching anxiously during the ride over have succumbed to the numbness. Following a Russian trafficker onto his ship feels like nothing more than a vivid dream. It’s easy to convince myself that the breeze blowing in off the water is just my bedside fan cooling my face while I sleep.

I only manage to take a few steps before he stops in his tracks and spins to face me again.

“Give me your weapons,” he barks, and my heart rate spikes again.

“I don’t—”

Before I can finish lying, he closes the space between us with two quick steps and gropes me roughly. It takes all of two seconds for him to find the pistol and pull it out. He scowls at me as he ejects the clip, tucking it into his pocket.

“More lies and I’ll shoot you,” he says, so casually that I almost laugh. I swallow down the manic feeling rising in my throat and give a jerky nod.

He tosses my unloaded pistol over the railing, into the water below, then pivots on his heel and keeps walking. Is there enough light for Elio and the others to get the lay of the land through the pinhole camera in my tie clip? I can’t do much other than hope at this point.

We pass two more men with guns patrolling the deck of the ship. They nod at the man I’m following and eye me suspiciously, but that’s the extent of it. And then I notice that the armed men aren’t the only ones here. A young-looking man who can’t be much older than twenty is mopping the deck. He looks up at me as we pass, and there’s unmistakable fear in his eyes before he hurries to focus on the task at hand. I don’t know why it didn’t occur to me sooner that there might be crew who run this ship who have nothing to do with trafficking kids. They might be prisoners of the Russian mob just as much as the kids we’re trying to rescue are.

My jaw ticks with the urge to pull my tie up near my mouth and whisper to Elio not to kill anyone innocent onboard, but obviously I can’t do that. Besides, even if I could, I know enough to realize that once shit goes down, there won’t be much time to stop and ask each and every person they run across whether they’re here willingly or not. I swallow hard and focus on what I’m here to do.

“Pretty tight operation you’re running here. Does it take a lot of men to move these shipments?” I ask casually, and the man looks over his shoulder at me.

“Why? Are you writing a book?”

“Uh... no,” I mutter, rubbing my hand along the back of my neck.

“Good. Then stop asking stupid questions.”

He stops at a door and raps quickly three times before turning the handle. He holds the door open and gestures for me to go inside. It's a dimly lit storage room with no windows and just one door in and out. There are two dozen girls, just like Casimir promised, none over the age of thirteen if I had to guess, huddled together, filling the space. He nods to the single armed man inside, and they exchange quiet words in Russian for a moment before the other man cuts a sharp gaze in my direction.

"Here they are." He tilts his head towards the kids. "Just like we agreed. Give me the money and take them."

"Sure." Bile rises in my throat as I look over the kids, dirty and dressed in tattered clothes, some of them with tear stains on their cheeks, all of them with haunted gazes. Not a single one of them utters a word, which is eerie all on its own. "Let me just give Casimir a call real quick first."

Russian number two narrows his eyes, but grunts in acknowledgment. My hands don't tremble as I reach into my pocket and pull out my phone. Just like the moments before a fight, and the other night at Casimir's place, a sense of focused calm washes over me. I changed Elio's name in my phone to say Casimir, in case they look at my screen, which they both do. I hit the call button and bring it to my ear, not paying any attention to the sound of the ring in my ear, too focused on the body language of both Russians in the room with me, running through mental calculations so ingrained that they happen without much conscious thought at all.

Elio picks up after the fourth ring, just like we agreed. He answers in a deeper voice, closer to Casimir's timbre. "You got the kids?"

"I've got them," I answer, taking a subtle step to put myself between Russian number one and the exit.

"Good." He's silent for several seconds, but I can hear the sound of his breathing

through the phone, and I swear I can hear all the shit he wishes he could say right now. You've got this, Boss. I love you. Take those fuckers out, then sit tight like we talked about, so I can wrap this up and you can take me home and fuck me stupid . A-fucking-men. I've got this. We've got this.

I end the call, and then in a lightning-fast move, before either of them realizes I'm finished talking, I cock my arm back and swing on Russian number one. It's a gamble that's just as likely to end with my lifeless body riddled with bullet holes as anything else, but it's all I've got.

My fist connects hard with the side of his head. He stumbles sideways and goes down like a sack of potatoes before Russian number two even catches up with what's happening. He raises his gun, but I'm faster by about half a second, spinning and throwing a fist in his direction too. A loud pop echoes through the air, but it's not enough to stop my momentum. The second one goes down just as hard as the first did, dropping to his knees, then flopping forward, unconscious.

The kids press themselves into a tighter mass, cowering as close to the wall as possible.

"It's okay, I'm not here to hurt you." I hold my hands up to prove it, but that only makes a few of the younger ones start to cry. Shit, I'm not even sure if any of them speak English, and I don't have a hell of a lot of time to babysit. Keeping them safe in here is probably the best I can do.

There's a hot feeling in the side of my stomach as I bend over to take the guns out of the unconscious men's hands, tucking each one into my waistband. I dart my eyes between the two of them, then around the sparse room. There's nothing to restrain them with in here, and fuck knows how long it will be before they come to.

The pop, pop, pop of gunshots resounding outside of the door is either promising or

concerning, and I'm not in any position to guess which. If I were Elio, I would just shoot these men before they wake up. They're going to die tonight one way or the other, so does it really matter if I'm the one to pull the trigger or if someone else does it?

Can I pull the trigger? In front of a bunch of kids, no less. It feels... unlikely. I chew on the inside of my cheek, frustration at myself rising. I'm here to protect them, and if I can't do what needs to be done, we could all end up fucked. I look at the kids again—skinny, dirty, terrified. These men did that to them, and fuck knows how many other kids just like them. Fine, the Morettis are criminals in their own right, but they aren't... this .

I reach back for one of the guns I just tucked away.

"Close your eyes." I mime the action for the kids, and they seem to understand instantly, ducking their heads or putting their hands over their eyes.

Putting the barrel of the pistol to the back of each of the Russian's heads and squeezing the trigger is surprisingly easy. Easier than I expected it would be. Easier than it probably should be. I don't think I'll lose a wink of sleep tonight over the world being short a few child traffickers.

The door flies open, and I raise the gun and step in front of the kids with the same quick reflexes that let me knock those fuckers out before they had a chance to blink. It takes me a few heart pounding seconds to realize that Elio's smiling back at me from the open doorway. He looks down at the dead men and then back at me without missing a beat.

"Good work, Boss," he says, then he frowns. "Holy shit, were you shot?"

ELIO

Orion looks a little dazed. He unbuttons the suit jacket and pulls it aside, and I gasp loudly at the crimson blood staining the shirt underneath.

“Fuck,” I mutter, taking a step closer and tearing his shirt open without pause so I can get a better look.

“I didn’t even feel it,” he grunts, looking down with his head cocked curiously.

I drop to my knees to get a better look, and his fingers slide instinctively through my hair. There are a dozen traumatized kids two feet away and my boyfriend is possibly bleeding out, but that move gets my dick hard anyway. And mine isn’t the only one. There’s a noticeable bulge in the silky slacks Orion is wearing. Adrenaline is a hell of a thing.

“You might want to save that blood flow for your more vital organs,” I murmur.

“That one feels pretty vital.” He chuckles.

I dab the blood away with his soaked shirt and breathe a sigh of relief. “It looks like it just grazed you.” I scramble back to my feet and push the unbuttoned shirt off of his shoulders, taking the jacket with it. He doesn’t fight me, just takes the wadded-up material when I hand it to him. “Keep pressure on it until we can get you stitches.”

“I’ll be fine.”

A crooked smile tugs at one side of my lips. “I know you will.”

“There you are.” Alessio appears in the doorway behind me. “Looks like we got them all.”

“The crew?” Orion croaks.

“They’re fine. A little shaken, but they were smart enough to duck and cover to avoid the crossfire,” he answers. “Our guys are piling up the rest of the bodies now, so they can sail this bitch right back to Nikandr with a message from the Morettis.”

“Try to run any more ‘merchandise’ through Wildcliff and he’ll lose a lot more than a single shipment and a dozen soldiers,” I say darkly, and Alessio nods.

“What happens to the kids?” Orion asks.

“We’ve got it covered,” I assure him.

Alessio turns to the kids and hunches down a little with his hands on his knees, doing his best impression of a kids’ show host. He says something to them in stilted Russian. I’m guessing it’s along the lines of “We’re here to help. Come with us.” Because they all start filing away from the wall.

“Come on.” I lead Orion out of the room with the kids behind us and Les bringing up the rear. We pass Mauro, one of my soldiers, dragging a body down the deck on our way off the ship. “There are two more in the storage room just down there.” I let him know.

Lorenzo is waiting on the dock with a couple of large men, both sporting buzz cuts, standing stiffly. Even in jeans and t-shirts, I’d pick them out as cops from a mile off. Of course, I already knew these two were cops anyway.

“Grif.” I nod in greeting. “Vander.”

“Moretti,” Vander greets me for the both of them, eyeing the kids trailing behind me. “I was just telling your brother that he’d better have a damn good reason for dragging us out here at this time of night.”

“It wasn’t for your company,” Lorenzo says dryly, and Vander laughs.

“I see that.”

“I trust you can take it from here?” I ask.

“Yeah, we’ve got it,” Grif says.

“Good. I’ve gotta get Orion to the hospital.” I nudge him to get him moving again.

“Are you okay?” Enzo seems to notice Orion’s state of undress for the first time.

“I’m fine,” he says, more firmly this time. It sounds like the shock has worn off, his voice deep and clear again like I’m used to. “I don’t need the hospital.”

“What do you have against getting stitches?” I arch an eyebrow at him. “Don’t tell me you’re afraid of needles.” His scowl deepens and he huffs through his nose. My eyes widen and I bark out a laugh. “Oh my god, you’re afraid of needles?”

“I’m not afraid,” he grumbles.

I wrap an arm around him and take over holding pressure on his wound while we walk, making our way back to the car, leaving everyone else to wrap up this bullshit.

“Sure, Boss,” I tease lightly. “What if I promise to hold your hand the whole time?”

He growls in response, and I laugh again.

When we reach the car, I help him inside, guiding him into his seat. He grabs for my tie before I can lean out, yanking me in roughly and claiming my lips in a hard, biting kiss that steals my breath and makes my pulse race more than anything else tonight



has.

“I love you, Elio,” he says gruffly when he lets me go.

“I love you too, Orion,” I murmur, dragging my tongue along his bottom lip. “That’s why I’m taking you to the hospital.”

“Dammit,” he rumbles, letting go of my tie.

It only takes me a few seconds to get in on the other side and get us the hell out of here. He reclines his seat a few inches and closes his eyes.

“How are you feeling?” I ask, glancing over at him every few seconds. He hasn’t lost much blood, but that doesn’t stop me from worrying.

“Like a Moretti,” he answers wryly.

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

He’s quiet for a few seconds, and I hate that I hold my breath while I wait for his answer. After everything, I feel like I’m still waiting for his verdict. Waiting to know whether he can see himself in this with me long term. Can he handle the life I’m stuck in?

“It’s... a necessary evil,” he finally says, reaching over to put a hand on my thigh. “And it’s worth it.”

“For me?” The surprise in my voice is borderline embarrassing, but I can’t call it back once it’s out there.

Orion’s laughter is deep and rumbling, filling the car and vibrating right through me.

“Yeah, Brat. For you.”

### Chapter 23

#### ELIO

“I can’t believe you bullied that doctor into giving me Oxy,” Orion mutters around a chuckle, following me into my apartment... our apartment. The triage nurse looked like she was about to piss herself when I turned up again tonight, holding the bloody shirt to Orion’s oozing gut. At least she didn’t give me attitude this time before scurrying off to get Doctor Anderson.

Lucky for her, because no matter how many times he insisted he was fine, I wasn’t above pulling out a gun to get things moving if necessary to get Orion taken care of in a timely manner.

I snort and look over my shoulder at him as I toe off my shoes. He’s wearing the wrinkled, blood-soaked shirt. Unbuttoned, of course. His tie was abandoned a long time ago, and is now wadded up, the tail of it hanging out of the pocket of his pants. He looks hot in a ‘my boyfriend just rose from the dead’ kind of way.

“I didn’t bully him, I asked .” I scoff, lining up my shoes on the rack, then dropping to my knees to untie his. A momentary shiver runs through me with the leftover terror from kneeling just like this earlier, peeling his shirt open and not knowing what I would find. I swallow that feeling down and lean into his touch when he drags his fingers roughly through my hair again.

He purses his lips and quirks an eyebrow, calling me out without having to utter a single word. It’s probably fucked up that his disapproval makes my cock spring to

life so damn easily, but I'm past giving a shit about whether my kinks are mentally healthy or not. They work for me, and Orion isn't complaining.

"Right, I'm sure he felt completely free to tell you 'no' if he thought the pills were overkill," he says dryly.

"You were shot , Boss." Just saying the word makes my insides burn with rage. I almost wish he hadn't put a bullet in that fucker's head before I got there. I would have woken him up and made him suffer a little first for what he did.

"I was grazed."

I roll my eyes and lean in closer, loving the sting along my scalp as he tightens his hold on my hair, then flick my tongue teasingly along the trail of hair under his belly button. He groans and jerks his hips.

"Don't take them then." I shrug and nip at the same spot that I just licked. "I wanted you to have them if you needed them, that's all."

Orion yanks on my hair, tugging my head back sharply.

"Thank you."

The soft words in contrast with his rough treatment is a level of fuck yes, I didn't know I was craving. A needy sound tightens in my throat the same way my briefs pull snug around my thickening cock.

"Anytime, Boss," I choke out, licking my lips. "Do you want to go to bed? It's pretty late." I actually have no fucking clue what time it is, but I'm guessing he's crashing from all the adrenaline, and regardless of what he says, he has to be hurting from that graze wound.

“Shower first,” he grunts.

Using one foot to nudge his shoes out of the way, he doesn't wait for me to get back to my feet. His fingers clench tighter in my hair, forcing a heated gasp from me as he starts down the hallway and I have to scramble on my knees to keep up with him. The hardwood underneath me makes my knees ache almost instantly, my breath catching and my head spinning as all the blood in my body rushes to pool between my legs. My cock throbs and my balls twitch.

I stumble a few times, tears springing to the corner of my eyes from the pain radiating through my scalp. The tender throb in every single hair follicle pulses through all the cells in my body until I feel scorched from the inside, fucking desperate, and humiliated in a way that makes it hard to catch my breath.

When we reach the bathroom, Orion releases me and I sag forward, bracing my palms on the cold marble floor. He slides his fingers gently through my hair, soothing the hot pain with a delicate touch. A sob tears from my throat, and a few of the tears that were prickling at the corners of my eyes a few seconds ago spill over to run down my cheeks.

As soon as they break loose, it's impossible to keep more from following. I've walked into a hundred life or death situations, but I've never been scared like I was tonight having to watch Orion do it. Everything I shoved down deep earlier, every worry and doubt that I locked behind a wall of confidence and indifference comes spilling out with a few more heavy gasps. My body quakes with embarrassing, uncontrollable tears.

“Come here, sweetheart.” Orion's words are so gentle, they make me cry even harder.

He joins me on the floor, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me close. I bury my face in the crook of his neck, my tears slicking his skin instantly. I can still smell

the faint odor of gunpowder lingering under the heavy metallic scent of his blood. I cling to him harder and stop trying to fight the flood.

“Alessio and Sal had to physically hold me back when that fucker took your gun. I was about to storm in there and blow the whole thing,” I confess when the tears finally start to slow.

“Well, no one would have thanked you for that. Especially not those kids,” he says, kissing the side of my head.

I nod and sniffle, feeling like a little kid myself for a few seconds. Even when I was a little kid, crying like this wasn’t acceptable. I pull back and use the backs of my hands to hastily dry my face.

“I can’t lose you, Orion. If anyone ever takes you from me, I’ll fucking kill them, and their whole goddamn family.” Part of me is expecting the usual reprimand, a reminder that violence isn’t the answer, that I’m spoiled and a little warped for wanting to solve every problem with bloodshed. But it doesn’t come.

He smiles and puts his hands on either side of my face, tilting my face up and leaning in to claim my lips in a biting, possessive kiss that I feel all the way down to my toes.

“I think I would too,” he murmurs, then nips my bottom lip. “So let’s not let that happen. Deal?”

I nod, bumping our noses together. “Deal.”

“On your feet,” he says gruffly, pushing himself up to standing again.

The simple instruction grounds me. The crashing waves of fear recede, not leaving anything in their wake except for the glistening dampness on Orion’s shoulder and

the stickiness on my cheeks. My legs wobble under me, but it's not a problem for long. As soon as I'm upright, he backs me up against the bathroom counter, pinning me there with his sturdy body. I sigh and sag into him, my cock swelling rapidly all over again.

He puts a hand under my chin and uses it to tilt my head back. My muscles relax and tight knots deep inside me loosen. I'm more than happy to let Orion position me however he likes, undress me, order me around for the rest of the night... hell, the rest of our lives if I have anything to say about it. Outside of these walls, in front of everyone else, I'll carry the weight I have to, but in the quiet of our apartment, all I want is to be owned and used and hurt and fucking cherished by him.

He undoes my tie, then works open the buttons on my shirt one by one, undressing me slowly like we have all the time in the world. To anyone else, his expression would probably look impassive, stoic even, his eyes roaming over my face and then down to follow the inches of skin he exposes little by little. But I'm starting to learn the subtle twitches of the muscles around his eyes, and the almost imperceptible curves of his mouth. Like the slight part of his lips and the crease that deepens between his eyebrows as he drags his fingertips along my exposed collarbone. Heated, teasing, hungry for me. I lick my lips and my cock jerks, heavy and needy.

"You're fucking desperate for me, aren't you?" he murmurs.

A whimper vibrates on my lips, and I nod. "I stole your towel once," I confess, barely above a whisper.

He cocks his head, his loose hair tumbling to one side, his eyebrows pulling closer together. "What?"

He unbuckles my belt and my cock twitches again, drooling warm, sticky precum that slicks the tip and dampens my briefs.

“A month or so ago, after your fight, you threw a towel at me in the locker room and told me to fuck off,” I remind him.

His hands are warm and demanding as he slips them past the waist of my underwear, reaching around to squeeze my ass cheeks, kneading them without any tenderness or mercy, digging his fingers into my flesh hard enough that I’m sure it will leave bruises. I hope it does. I moan and cant my hips, dragging my aching cock against the stiff outline of his.

Understanding dawns in his eyes and he chuckles.

“What did you do with it? I don’t even need to ask, do I? I bet you barely even got inside with it before you had it down your pants, humping it like the pathetic slut you are.” He lifts me up onto my toes and flicks his tongue along the seam of my lips, his breath fluttering against my tongue when I dart it out to try to catch his.

I nod again, bobbing my head. “I jerked myself off with it right up against the door. Shouted your name so loud they probably heard me three floors down.”

Orion growls possessively and slams his lips fully into mine again. The kiss is all teeth and tongue, the head of my cock catching against his through our clothes, over and over as he kneads my ass cheeks and feeds me muffled moans.

“You’re mine, Elio Moretti,” he rasps, biting my lip hard enough to draw a hiss from me.

“Yeah, Boss, I am,” I murmur, pushing his open shirt off his shoulders.

He yanks one hand off of my ass and grips my jaw instead, holding my gaze with a dark intensity that makes my heart beat even faster.



“And don’t you dare get any bright ideas about proposing, Brat. I’ll spank your ass so good you won’t sit down for days if you beat me to that too.”

I suck in a gasp, then rattle out a dizzying laugh. “You got it, Boss.”

He takes a step back, and I stumble forward at the unexpected loss.

“Finish undressing.” He shrugs off his ruined shirt and tosses it towards the bathroom trash.

Orion turns his back to me and strips out of his pants while he reaches into the shower to crank the water on. His pants and underwear fall below his sculpted ass, giving me the perfect view of the butterfly tattoo on his right cheek. I lazily palm my erection through my clothes, then do as he says and finish undressing. My gun ends up on the counter next to the sink, and the rest of my clothes are scattered on the floor. I’ll need to sort out which ones have too much of Orion’s blood on them to be salvaged, but that’s tomorrow’s problem.

He sticks his hand under the spray to test the temperature, then jerks his head to wordlessly call me over. As soon as I’m close enough, Orion grabs me by the back of the neck and hauls me into the shower. I trip over the small stone ledge and tumble into him, bracing my hands on his chest. His skin is slick within seconds, rivulets of water running between my fingers and soaking his hair.

I poke at the waterproof bandage the doctor used to protect his sutures, and Orion growls and bats my hand away.

“I’m fine .”

“You’re stubborn is what you are,” I grumble.

Both of his eyebrows go up, and a shiver of excitement zings down my spine. “What was that?”

I twist my lips into a smirk. “You, Orion Barros, are stubborn and pigheaded. And, frankly, a little fucking holier than thou.”

I know I’m pushing my luck when his eyes flash dangerously. He slides his hand from the back of my neck to my throat in the blink of an eye, before he spins me around and backs me up against the shower wall. The decorative stones have just the slightest bite against my back. Not as rough as the brick building when he fucked me in the alley, but enough to make me moan and squirm, just to feel it a little harder.

He chuckles, the low, menacing sound reverberating off the walls. “Okay.”

I blink, waiting for him to say more. Waiting for the tantalizing threats, the ball-tingling promises to teach me some fucking manners. He leaves his hand on my throat and reaches for the shampoo bottle with the other.

“Hand,” he demands, using his thumb to snap the cap open. I swallow, my throat bobbing against the firm press of his palm, not tight enough to stifle my breathing. I hold out my cupped hand, and he pours a generous amount of shampoo into it. My knees wobble, and I search his face for any hint of what kind of punishment he has planned for me, but he’s not giving anything away.

Orion puts the shampoo back on the ledge, then releases his grip on my throat and sinks to his knees. Even in this position, standing over him for a change, there’s not even a fraction of a second when I question which one of us is in charge. His blond hair is dark from the water, hanging heavy on his shoulders, the spray cascading over him. He blinks at the stray droplets that land too close to his eyes, but other than that, he’s perfectly stoic, holding me captive with nothing but his eyes boring into me, shampoo running out of my palm as I stare down at him.

“Wash my hair.”

The demand is so far from what I expected that it takes me a few seconds to process it. I’m not sure what I thought the shampoo was for, but it wasn’t this.

“You want—” I break off with a sharp gasp when he flicks the tip of my cock. It twitches heavily, an electric jolt tightening in my gut and making my toes curl against the slippery stone under my feet.

“You heard me,” Orion says gruffly. “Wash my hair.”

He bends his head forward. I’m not sure I understand the game, but I suppose I don’t have to. Actually, there’s a new kind of thrill in the off-center feeling. I bring both my hands to his head, massaging his scalp, and start to work the shampoo into a lather. He moans quietly and leans in to drag his tongue over the length of my hard, needy cock. He traces a scorching path from balls to tip, catching the clear string of precum that dribbles out of my slit.

“Oh, fuck,” I rasp, jerking my hips forward. My eyelids droop closed and my fingers go still, tangled in his hair.

“I didn’t say stop,” he growls.

Oh, right. I pry my eyes open, my chest heaving with a trembling breath, and try to focus again on gathering all the loose strands of his hair and working the rich, pine scented lather through them. Orion does it again, skipping the straight path this time and taking a more leisurely route from root to tip, tracing every throbbing vein with the tip of his tongue while heavy droplets land on my cock from the shower spray, making it feel like at least three tongues are on me at once.

I manage to keep my fingers moving. Barely. When he reaches the head of my cock

again, he grazes his teeth along the roll of my foreskin, and I pant and whimper.

He braces his hands against the wall on either side of my hips and leans his head back into my touch, closing his eyes and moaning. The sound settles in my balls, tingling and tightening, my cock bouncing eagerly for another lick, for his hand, for anything .

“Orion,” I whine, canting my hips and fruitlessly trying to drag his head back, to bring his mouth to where I’m fucking desperate for it.

Orion lets out another low, deep chuckle. Fuck . I just figured out what the game is.

“You wanted stubborn, Brat? You’ve got it.” He smirks and then purses his lips and blows on the tip of my cock. The contrast of his breath against my overheated skin and the scorching water makes my eyes roll back. “Keep washing,” he reminds me.

“Sorry,” I gasp, forcing my fingers to move again.

“Mmhm,” he hums with amusement.

He catches my head between his lips, and I huff out a frantic breath, using every ounce of willpower I have to hold still and keep working on his hair. Maybe if I’m good...

Orion purses his lips around the swell of my head and sucks, lapping at the unending drip of precum that dribbles out. The rest of my shaft throbs in protest, thickening even harder, swelling between his lips.

“Please,” I gasp, losing the battle with my own self-control and thrusting my hips.

He’s ready for it though. His hands come off the wall instantly, his fingers digging into my thighs as he shoves me back into place with bruising force, the mildly rough

stone dragging against my bare ass like sandpaper. He releases my cock with a wet pop and wipes the back of his hand over his lips as he looks up at me.

“You like having a tongue in your hole, Brat?”

Normally? Yes. The way he’s likely planning to do it to punish me…?

I whimper again, just as pathetic as he labeled me earlier, and nod eagerly.

“Yes, Boss.”

“Then rinse my hair out and turn around.”

My hand is shaking so badly it takes me two tries to unhook the spray nozzle from the wall. When I manage it, Orion closes his eyes and hums softly as I rinse the suds out of his long locks, watching them run down his skin and disappear down the drain.

While his eyes are closed, I stare down at him greedily. The cut on his jaw is an angry pink line now, no doubt preparing to leave a scar, and the bumps on the bridge of his nose tell the story of at least a few breaks. Every inch of him is rugged and real and so goddamn perfect it hurts.

“I love you.” I untangle my remaining fingers from his hair and ghost my fingertips over that pink future-scar.

He opens his eyes and bares his teeth in a feral kind of smile that sends another shiver down my spine.

“Sweet talk isn’t going to save you, Brat. Turn around.”

I huff out a laugh, replace the shower nozzle, and then do as he says.

## ORION

Elio's hands braced on the shower wall, his legs spread, that pretty pucker peeking out from between the cheeks of his ass is an entire fucking wet dream of its own. I lean in close and sink my teeth into his left cheek. He gasps and shoves his hips back towards me, always the eager little pain slut. I bite down a bit harder and bring my hand down on the other cheek, the resounding thwack of the slap echoing off the bathroom walls, almost loud enough to drown out the ball-clenching moan he lets out.

I pull back and drag my thumb over the bruise left by my teeth, rumbling a pleased, possessive growl in my throat. Taking his cheeks in both hands, I part them, letting the stream of water from the showerhead pummel his pucker, watching the way it clenches and twitches, his heavy balls jerking and pulling up tight.

I drag the flat of my tongue through his trench, slurping up the water that pools on my tongue, carrying the muted, musky flavor of his skin. When I reach his hole, his breath hitches, and his legs tremble. With a wicked grin, I tease the very tip of my tongue along the rim.

“Oh fuck, please, Boss.”

“I wish I could, Brat, I really do,” I murmur, brushing my lips back and forth over his hole. “But I’m stubborn and pigheaded. And what was that last thing you said?”

He squirms and whines. I tease the tip of my tongue in a slow circle again, waiting for him to answer.

“Holier than thou,” he repeats through clenched teeth.

“That’s right. Not sure I know what that one means, but it didn’t sound like a

compliment.” I nip at his rim and his hole quivers.

“I’m sorry. I was just winding you up,” Elio pants.

I hum, lapping at his hole with a bigger lick this time, feeling it flutter under my tongue, softening and opening, desperate to be filled by my tongue, my fingers, my cock... probably all three tonight if he can work on his attitude. “Maybe you need to say some nice things about me, and I’ll see how stubborn I feel after that.”

I knead his ass cheeks hard, then shove my tongue roughly into his hole, licking him deep. He wails and jerks his hips, trying to fuck himself on my tongue. I pull one hand back and slap the back of his thigh just as hard as I slapped his ass before. Elio yelps, and his balls bounce against my chin.

“I love that you’re stubborn,” he says breathlessly. “You’re brutal and fucking dangerous, but you have a kind soul. Probably the kindest soul I’ve ever met, considering all the shit you’ve been through.” I’m not sure what I was expecting. Shallow, filthy compliments maybe. Praise for my dick or the way I’m licking him. His words hit a place inside of me I didn’t know I needed him to see though.

I hum again, then take another deep, long lap over his pucker. He gasps when I let go of my grip on his ass cheeks and get back to my feet. My cock has been achingly hard for what feels like hours now thanks to a combination of adrenaline and Elio. I put my hands over his, pressing them against the wall, and slip my cock into the crease between his cheeks.

He shudders and groans.

“What about your stitches?” he pants, grinding himself up and down my length shamelessly, the muscles in his back tightening and his fingers curling under mine.

“You’re right, I have to be careful.” I reach for the shampoo again, feeling the flutter of his impatient, greedy hole against my shaft, the warmth of his supple cheeks clenched around me.

I fill my palm with shampoo then tilt the bottle to drizzle some between us, watching it slide down his crack to coat his hole. Gripping the base of my cock, I pull back, line up, and then fill him with one slow thrust. Elio’s inner muscles squeeze tight around me, gripping my cock as he tries to catch his breath between whimpers and moans. I close my eyes and savor the feeling of his hot channel rippling around me, the heavy rise and fall of his back against my chest with every gulped breath, my hips pressed up against the perky globes of his ass cheeks.

Then I open my eyes and bring the shampoo that’s filling my palm to his head.

“What are you...?” He twists his head, trying to look back at me, clenching hard around my cock.

I groan and my balls jump, but I don’t pull out or move at all, except to grind just a little bit deeper.

“You said I needed to be careful. You’re right. I can’t hold you up against this wall and fuck the cum out of you. I’m bound to tear a suture like that.” I massage the shampoo into his hair the same way he did with mine.

“Oh my god, you’re so mean,” he groans, using the small amount of space he has to bounce on my cock, managing short thrusts that keep my cock deep inside of him where it’s hot and tight.

“Mean?” I scoff. “You can’t possibly want me to wrap my hand around your throat and pound your prostate with long, hard, painful thrusts.” I purr the words right next to his ear. My cock jerks inside of him, and he grinds against me again, more



frantically this time, whining and whimpering my name.

I grunt and use my hips to press him even more fully against the wall, pinning him there so he can't move another inch. His cock is trapped against the rocky wall, his hands flattened underneath mine again, leaving the suds in his hair to trickle down his neck and shoulders.

"Fine, make yourself come, Brat."

"I was trying." He squirms again but can't manage to move.

"Like this," I rumble, nipping at his earlobe. "Make yourself come."

His disbelieving huff turns into a moan when I bite his ear harder.

"I don't..." He pants. "Say more dirty things."

I grin and drag my nose along the shell of his ear. "When you first started coming around, showing up to all my fights, barging into the locker room to bother me after, I didn't give a fuck who you were. I wasn't scared of you, I wasn't intimidated, I just wanted to wipe that cocky, entitled grin off your face. I used to imagine grabbing you by the hair and shoving my cock into your mouth to shut you up. I lost track of how many times I jerked off in that shower, wondering if you were on the other side of the door and what you would do if I put you over my knee and spanked the entitlement right out of you."

He moans long and low, his inner muscles clenching and twitching around me.

"More," he rasps, his body trembling and his breath coming in short, stilted gasps.

"I still want to spank the entitlement right out of you, Brat. Maybe we should have a

standing appointment every night. I can turn your ass red and make you cry the way you deserve.”

Elio lets out a sob and bobs his head. “Yes.”

“Yeah? That’s what you want, isn’t it? You need someone to put you in your place every day, remind you that being the underboss of the high and mighty Morettis isn’t the be all end all. And then, if you’re good and you take your spankings the way you should, maybe I’ll let you ride my cock every night too. How does that sound?”

“Yes,” he moans again. “Yes, yes.”

My cock throbs and pulses inside of him, my balls painfully tight, my muscles aching with the urge to pound him the way we both want. He’s fucking close, I can feel it in the hitch of his breathing and the desperation dripping off of every sound he makes.

“Come for me like a good boy, Elio. Come for me like the eager cock slut you are.”

The sound that tears from his throat is fucking feral—half wail, half moan, entirely undone. He starts to pulse around me, hard, his inner muscles squeezing rhythmically around my cock, over and over as he sobs and gasps my name. Without even a twitch of my hips, I follow him over the edge, roaring as my balls clench and the heat in my gut explodes.

I bite and kiss the back of his neck, unbothered by the taste of the shampoo that coats his skin. I wrench him away from the wall just enough to wrap my hand around his throbbing cock, covered in his cum. I grind my hips, filling him deep with pulse after pulse of my release, stroking him through the lingering waves of his, until we’re both breathless and spent, and the water starts to run cold.

“Hey, Boss,” he says breathlessly.

“Mm?” I grunt, my softening cock still buried in his ass as I reach for the shower nozzle to rinse the shampoo out of his hair.

“When you said you didn’t want me to beat you to a proposal...”

“Don’t you dare, Brat,” I growl.

He gives a tired chuckle, tilting his head back to help me with the shampoo.

“I was just going to ask how long you’re going to make me wait.”

“Why don’t you let me worry about that,” I suggest, placing a few lingering kisses along the back of his shoulder.

I put the shower nozzle back and my cock slips out of his hole. After I turn off the water, I part his cheeks again and groan with satisfaction at the sight of his reddened pucker and my cum leaking out of it. I use my thumb to gather the stray droplets and push them back inside. Elio moans and shivers again.

“Hey, Boss?” he says again, and my lips twitch with a smile.

“Yeah, Brat?”

“I love you.”

My heart swells so big inside of me that it’s a wonder it doesn’t kill me. Emotion tightens my throat, and I wrap my arms around him again, nuzzling the crook of his neck and slowly breathing in the warm, wet smell of his skin.

“I love you too.”

SIX MONTHS LATER

ELIO

Orion chuckles as I pull into the driveway of the quaint little house I've been visiting just about every Sunday since I was born.

"What?" I ask, putting the car in park and glancing at the silver band on my ring finger. He proposed a month ago, slipping the ring on my finger while we were in bed one morning, and I still haven't gotten over how fucking good it looks there. Maybe it's not so much the ring as the fact that it's proof Orion is mine. And, unlike all the bruises he's so fond of leaving hidden under my clothes, I can actually show the ring off to the world.

"I just can't get over the fact that a bunch of mobsters have Sunday dinner with Grandma." He gets out of the car, and I do the same.

"You won't be laughing when you taste Nonna's meatballs. I would literally kill a man for them." My stomach growls just thinking about Nonna's food.

"To be fair, that's a pretty low bar though, right?" he says dryly, and I bark out a laugh.

"It depends on the day, Boss. You know that." I wink and he just grins and shakes his head.

I fucking love the feral, brutal side of Orion, but watching him relax and let some of

his inner demons rest over the past six months has made me fall even more in love with him.

“Should we have tried harder to get Jack to come?” I ask. I bought him a wheelchair he can use on his own a few months ago, and we’ve managed to get him out and about a few times a week since then. I have a feeling Sarah had a lot to do with him accepting the expensive gift, but I’m not above using whatever leverage I can get. If a pretty girl was what it took, then so be it. Unfortunately, dinner at Nonna’s seemed to be a sticking point for him.

Orion shakes his head. “I don’t think he wanted everyone to see me feed him.”

“Oh.” I hadn’t thought of that.

“He’ll come around eventually,” he assures me, and I nod.

“He’s your family, which means he’s my family. I just want him to know that.”

He gives me a soft smile and comes around the car. He wraps his arms around me, and I lean into him.

“You’re pretty fucking sweet for a murderous mafioso, you know that?”

I snort. “Thanks, I think.”

Lorenzo’s car pulls in behind mine, and then two more park on the street. Alessio, Salvatore, Xaviaro, and Sparrow all pile out of their respective vehicles and the front door to the house swings open.

“Hurry up, ragazzi , the food is getting cold,” Nonna scolds.

“Uh-oh, let’s not get in trouble with Nonna Moretti,” Sparrow says without a hint of

mockery, picking up his pace and leading the way up the front walk.

We're all treated to hugs and comments about being too skinny.

"You'll have to send me home with some leftovers then, Nonna," I say, giving her a kiss on the cheek.

"Of course I will." She pats my cheek and smiles. "Now, tell me who this handsome man is."

"Nonna, this is my fiancé, Orion. I wanted to bring him by sooner, but he's usually busy with work."

"What do you do for work?" she asks, waving for us to follow her into the kitchen.

"Oh, um, I was an MMA fighter, but I just retired," he answers, throwing a grateful look in my direction.

I set up an irrevocable trust for Jack a few months ago, which I got a thorough spanking for followed by tearful thanks. It's more than enough to cover whatever medical needs come up, a nicer care facility, and any other damn thing he needs.

"Such a brutal sport." Nonna frowns and shakes her head.

Sparrow stifles a laugh; I'm guessing at the same irony that has me smiling. MMA is too brutal, but raising a family of mobsters is just another day in the life of Nonna Moretti.

"What are you going to do now?"

That's the million-dollar question, and it's one he's been dodging every time I've asked for weeks now. I arch an eyebrow, waiting to see if Nonna will manage to get

an answer.

His cheeks pink lightly, and he ducks his head. “I’ve been looking into what it would take to start a youth outreach program, actually.” He darts a shy glance in my direction again. “Maybe if the kids and teens in this city had options other than violence, things might start to change.”

The room is silent for a second, and it looks like Orion is holding his breath. Maybe waiting for us all to take offense or tell him the idea is stupid. Maybe just unsure what else to say about it.

Nonna nods approvingly. “I like it.”

His shoulders sag and he smiles. “Thanks,” he murmurs.

“Now, you boys, help me with all this food.” She waves at the serving dishes, and everyone jumps into action.

I grab Orion’s hand before he can pick anything up and lean in close.

“I love that idea too, Boss. Count me in.”

His eyebrows go up. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. Money, help, whatever you need to make this happen.”

“Somehow, I don’t think a Mafia funded youth outreach really sends the message we’re going for.” Humor rumbles in his voice, and I chuckle.

“Fair enough. It can be on the down-low though.” I shrug.

“I appreciate it, Brat. We’ll talk about it.” He kisses my forehead, and I grin. “I’m

trying to get Jack on board too. He's being stubborn, but I think he'll come around. There's so much he could do to help; he just needs a kick in the ass to do it."

I nod and return his affection with a kiss right over the scar on his jaw, his rough stubble tickling my lips. "If anyone can pull it off, it's you," I murmur.

This city might be a bit fucked up, just like we all are, but if Orion thinks he can change it, make it better... hell, he's managed to make me better, so anything is possible. One thing I know for sure? I'll never bet against Orion Barros.

The End