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Chapter 3 — the prodigal problem…

Staten Island, New York
Nico Russo, Gallo Estate

"All right, princess, rise and shine," rang a deep baritone that woke Nico straight out of a dead sleep. He opened his eyes and promptly squeezed them shut again. Maybe if he ignored the sudden pain in his ass, then it, like its noise, would go away. The clapping didn't help. "Up and at 'em. Let's go."

Nico groaned through the piercing headache. "The fuck did you just call me?"

"I didn't stutter. *Move*."

"What time is it?"

"You ask too many questions for someone in your position. Think about that a little and get up. Last warning."

Nico cracked one eye open and seriously considered homicide. It felt early for those types of thoughts, although he didn't have a clock to tell him so. "What time is it?"

"Seven-thirty. Plenty of time to get you up to the house if you would move."

"Who rolls their ass out of bed before ten?"

"Most of us," the bald man replied. "Weren't you just at university or something? Pretty sure a requirement there is you getting up and going to classes."

"If that's what you want to call that shithole down in Florida." Nico had plenty of other names for the UoM, too. None of them nice. "Only idiots take classes before eleven in the morning. Not even professors want to be there that early."

"Funny," Larkin deadpanned. "Next step is an ice bath in bed and trust me when I say, I already have the bucket waiting."

The guy's voice droned on while Nico stared at the ceiling of the guest home's master bedroom and wondered if he could get away with killing the consigliere's head of security. His old therapist would have called those thoughts intrusive, but Nico didn't mind them so much anymore. It wouldn't feel normal if he didn't have a constant stream of snarky, internal dialogue telling him how the world would be a better place with one less dumbass in it.

"The boss wants to see you at eight sharp this morning, and you're not making me look bad again, shithead."

"Do you give everybody stupid nicknames or am I a special case?"

"You earn it, I'll use it. It's a *call-it-how-I-see-it* type of thing." Larkin flung the curtains open, and warm light spilled across the bed and pillows. "After what you pulled on me last night, you know you earned it."

Shithead, he could handle.

Princess? Not so much.

Nico had been called worse on a good day, but disrespect never settled well with him. It had a way of lingering with him until he properly answered back. Those doing the disrespecting felt

more inclined to do it again when left unchecked. Being called princess sounded a lot like disrespect first thing in the morning before he had a coffee or taken a proper piss.

"Which boss?" Nico asked after clearing his throat of morning grogginess.

"The only boss I answer to. Now move. I'm serious, enough with the back and forth. I'm not here to work on your conversational skills, and I really don't care to talk with you at all."

"Ow," Nico replied, pouting for the act of it all, "that hurts my feelings."

Larkin barked out a laugh. "What feelings?"

Well, he had one question answered about Salvatore's head of security. It made the thoughts of killing him even easier to entertain if only because getting away with it would be minutely simpler given his non-affiliation to the mob.

"So, you're not a made man," he said, finally sitting up in bed.

Larkin paused in the doorway; his back turned to Nico. "Did Sal introduce me as a friend of his yesterday evening when you arrived?"

"He wouldn't tell me anyway," Nico said of Salvatore Gallo. "I'm not made, either."

Some of them still followed the rules. Like Sal.

"Look at you, answering your own questions." The man eyed Nico a moment longer. "And I hope you know that you ain't gonna make one, what with the way you're going lately, kid. A Don's son or not."

As if people hadn't said that kind of thing to him for his whole life. That wasn't even a new insult. Nico wished the comment stung.

"Be dressed and at the front door in fifteen minutes, do you hear me?"

"I hear you," Nico replied blithely, but he didn't care. Therein lay the difference between the two of them. One would get his ass chewed off when he showed up late and feel some kind of way about it. The other? Didn't make a wave in his day. "And hey."

It wasn't a question. Larkin still turned around like it was. "Yeah?"

The crystal dish from the bedside table smashed into a thousand tiny, glittering pieces from where it landed against the doorframe. Mere inches from Larkin's bald head. Nico outright smirked as the other man glowered. Glass shards tinkled onto the cream-colored carpet like raindrops on a rooftop.

Satisfaction had a nice ring to it.

"My aim's a little off," Nico lied, "lucky for you."

"That so?"

"Mmhmm. Call me any name but my own again, and I'm gonna get so much worse for you. You don't know how hard I can make your job, motherfucker. Last night was easy for me. Know it and act accordingly."

If he had to be here, as per his father's demand, then what mattered more came down to everyone else around Nico understanding exactly who the fuck he was and how he moved.

If they started shit, he'd start back. If they wanted trouble, here he was.

Larkin's chin tipped up subtly, letting the younger man know he heard the threat loud and clear, and would likely take it seriously. As he should. Nico didn't have the patience for empty or idle threats. If he said it, he meant it.

"You've got five minutes now."

Nico rolled his eyes and threw the blanket to the side. "Choke on a dick. I'll be down when I'm down. Make sure you tell Salvatore I told you that, too."

•••

Nico sipped hot coffee from the mug he'd brought along while Larkin strolled ahead of him by a few paces. He didn't rush into the study-slash-office space currently occupied by an annoyed Salvatore.

He gave the consigliere credit—the study had a good vibe. It wasn't full of wood paneling, and it didn't smell like cigar smoke like his father's did. Slightly off-white walls matched the shelves and desk while a massive gray rug, circular in shape, tied the middle of the space together. The same gray color coated the crown molding and the rest of the trim in the room.

He also didn't get the feeling that he was about to get his head bashed in the second he stepped inside. Another new experience for him even if he did deserve it occasionally.

A seating area made up of a loveseat and matching white leather recliners surrounded a glass coffee table and sat in front of an unlit fireplace. A chess board waited to be played, the moves still evident and left where the players had walked away from an unfinished game. Floor-to-ceiling shelves hugged every nook and cranny, stuffed full of books and too many other things to properly acknowledge, except for the massive windows behind the desk.

Nico didn't want someone to think he had a reason for staring too much or too long at the things on the shelves. Particularly, the pictures of Salvatore and his daughter that took up a lot of residence on the shelves at eye-level. As if those were the items on the shelves which the owner of the space wanted seen the most.

Something pinched inside his chest at the framed memories. Not because the two looked contented, or had clearly done a lot of traveling together, which meant time well spent, and probably happily.

So, why the pain?

Because that sort of thing existed at all. A bond between a father and child that made them smile and look like they meant it. A particular glint, like joy, lit up Frankie's face in the pictures when she gazed upon her father. He didn't look at his daughter with annoyance or barely concealed hatred. Just with love. It was real.

Nico couldn't relate.

The windows behind the desk overlooked the front of the property. With a simple turn of his chair, Salvatore could see from his front door to the gate at the end of a long driveway. It was the only thing about the space that felt...expected.

Nico pretended to admire the shelves closest to his spot near the door as a quiet word passed between Larkin and Sal. A vinyl records collection made up an entire section of wall. The record player to enjoy said collection sat on a table beside the corner of the desk where Sat rested in a moderately sized leather office chair which was proportionate to the size of the room.

Men in power had a bad habit of thinking the bigger, the better. Salvatore seemed to balance it. Speaking of him...

"You're awfully quiet over there for someone who, as I hear it, had plenty to say this morning," Salvatore said to draw Nico's attention away from the shelves nearest the door.

He made a sad face at Larkin who stood with his arms crossed beside the desk. "Aww, did someone tattle on me?"

Larkin inhaled deeply. "You said, and very clearly—"

"I know what the fuck I said," Nico interjected. "And I meant it."

Salvatore sighed noisily. "I asked for you to be here at eight this morning. It's nearly nine."

"Given the state of my current circumstances," Nico replied, half smiling the whole time, "I don't think an hour is gonna hurt any of us. Other than improving my mood for this chat you want to have."

"Did it improve your mood?"

"Marginally."

Not even drugs and sex did that for Nico anymore, and those used to be a given to get him feeling a good kind of way. Shit disturbing was really the last thing he had to enjoy at this point although, that usually found him in trouble, like now.

Larkin grumbled something that sounded a lot like, "What improved his mood was throwing things, but who is asking me?"

Salvatore acted as if he hadn't heard the man while his gaze locked in on Nico and didn't waver. "Did it not factor into your choices at all that, oh, I don't know, I might have had something to do this morning?"

Nico gave him a look. "Did you?"

Sal said nothing.

It didn't matter. He already knew the answer. No.

Otherwise, they wouldn't be doing this. Nico would still be down at the guesthouse safely tucked within the four walls of a high stone fence that he had no problem climbing what with all the trees and vinery around.

Fucking idiots.

"You know," Nico said as his running shoes carried him closer to the seating arrangement in the middle of the room, "I could already be gone if I wanted."

Last night proved as much.

Salvatore leaned back in his chair and steepled the tips of his fingers together. "I suppose. Why not go, then?"

"Contrary to popular belief, I can actually do what I'm told."

Larkin scoffed at that comment.

Nico just rolled his eyes.

"And what Giorgio says, goes...right?" Nico added about his father. "That's how it works. He calls the shots."

The mere mention of the boss had Salvatore glancing Larkin's way. "Take a walk, would you? I'll call you back when I'm ready."

"Sure thing, boss man." On his way past Nico, Larkin stared him down. "Behave."

"I also know how to do that. I just don't care to do it for you."

"Actually, you will do it for him," Salvatore said, his tone becoming firm as the office door closed. "You will behave for him, and anyone else I deem appropriate, the same way you did in this office with me so far today."

Nico cocked an eyebrow higher than the other. "With sarcasm and thinly veiled contempt?"

"With respect. I'm not saying it has to be perfect, Nico. You don't have to be perfect here, all right?"

Good thing. He didn't know where to begin for that.

“Trust me,” Sal stressed, shaking his head, “I get that literally no one would be happy to walk off an airplane just to immediately have their belongings and rights taken from them, told where they could and could not go, and expected to follow along without argument or discussion. I do get it, Nico.”

Salvatore then waved at the white chair beside Nico. “Are you going to sit?”

“If you’ll let me.”

“I asked for you to be here. You can sit.”

Actually, Nico didn’t just sit, as the other man suggested. In someone else’s private space, he always waited for the explicit invitation. It meant showing respect that others didn’t often consider. An invitation to sit comfortably in a place that meant something to them, hit different for Nico.

He still wavered in sitting until Salvatore murmured, “Pick a chair, son, it isn’t hard.”

Nico sat.

“Now, between you and me, and I do mean just you and me,” the other man said, folding his arms across his chest, “let’s get a few things straight.”

Nico was still trying to get beyond the flippant son comment. “Like what?”

“Like who is calling the fucking shots from here on out, for one. I know it probably wasn’t obvious to you yesterday evening when you found me waiting for you, and we didn’t have a lot of time to clear shit up, so I’ll take the time to shine it like crystal for you this morning.”

“Uh—”

“Me,” Sal interjected fast. “I’m the shot-caller here. Not your father. Not Larkin. And definitely not you. It’s me. What does that mean to you?”

Nico chewed over his thoughts, considering both what he should say, and what he wanted to. They were often not the same things. “I thought my father said—”

Sal put a hand up, silencing Nico instantly. “You are mine to do with what I see fit. Officially, you are my problem, even if I don’t know the specifics around why you ended up here quite yet.”

Nico’s brow lifted high at that comment. Sal didn’t miss it.

“What?”

“He didn’t tell you about Miami?” Nico questioned.

Salvatore’s cheek twitched. “To be fair, he threw this on me yesterday morning with zero notice, and I really just wanted to leave.”

Standard Giorgio behavior.

A snort fell from Nico. “Oh, I get that. Believe me.”

“Do you care to tell me about Miami? Do I need to know something?”

“I was told I couldn’t talk about it,” Nico replied, shrugging. “It’s a matter of national security. Those were the exact words used, for the record.”

Sal blinked. “What?”

“Yeah, you should probably just talk to Giorgio if you need to know.”

The man across the room massaged his right temple with two fingers in the shape of a gun as he took in the information. “Unreal. Okay, moving on. When I feel the need to report back to Giorgio on your comings and goings, then I will. Otherwise, what does that mean between us, Nico?”

Right...

“You call the shots,” he stated.

A nod answered him back. “And what does that mean?”

Nico cleared his throat and glanced down into the mug. “I guess I should have been up here at eight, right?”

“For starters.”

“I probably shouldn’t throw things that don’t belong to me.”

“Another good one. Anymore?”

“I’m sure you’ll let me know.”

“You’re goddamn right,” Sal said heavily, sitting straight and drumming his fingers to the desk, “starting with the fact that last night shouldn’t happen again. *Capisce*?”

“What do you—”

“Sitting on the stone wall. Conversating with my daughter. Being anywhere you are not supposed to be.”

“I’ll do my best,” Nico stated, opting for the most honest reply he could come up with.

“You’re being very…compliant.”

“What choice do I have given everything that is mine, is *his*,” Nico said of his father. “Besides, I know I’m a fuck-up. I’m sure you’re aware that this isn’t even the third time he’s tried handing me off to someone else to handle his problem.”

“Are you?”

Nico’s head tilted sideways. “What?”

“Are you a fuck-up?” Salvatore clarified. “Or is that what everyone thinks and sees, and it’s just easier for you to give them exactly what they expect?”

No one had ever asked Nico that before. It bothered him that he couldn’t immediately answer. “I…don’t know,” he admitted.

Something softened in Salvatore. “I must say, I’m surprised.”

“At?”

“You,” came the quiet reply.

Nico didn’t quite know what to make of that. “I’m sorry?”

“Let’s not pretend here. You didn’t suddenly grow a set of wings and a halo, Nico.” His mouth opened to speak, but nothing came out. Sal *tsked* chidingly under his breath. “I’ve heard the stories about you. Abject horror, young man. I’ve been involved in cleaning up more than one of your messes over the years, so I also have some firsthand experience in what you are capable of doing when you’re either pissed off, bored, or just out to prove yourself.”

Nico’s jaw tightened, feeling a bit like a bear being poked with a stick. Things had been going so well, too. “We’re not going to act like my upbringing has been a fucking cake walk, right?”

He expected Sal to do what everyone else did when faced with the reality of his history: deny, ignore, or deflect. Blame was a popular choice, too, but that one typically got used by those who had caused most of his grievances and issues.

Salvatore didn’t blink a lash at the call out. “Oh yes, and so neither of us forget, although I’m sure we never will for the same fucking reasons, I also had a personal hand in at least one of your father’s brutalities against you. You were the little black sheep of the family before that night, and then after—”

“The family’s black sheep, Marco’s scapegoat, and Dad’s punching bag. It was all the same before then, and it didn’t change after. Don’t worry, what happened didn’t change much about my home life.”

Sal's throat bobbed with a swallow. "But you did. You changed a lot. You cared less. Fought more. Actively looked for trouble and tried to die more times than the rest of us could comprehend."

Nico scoffed. "Giorgio liked to say I was trying to get closer to God."

"Fathers tend to do that. Excuse their kids' wrongs or soften the blow of what was done. Whether they're the cause or not. You should know, I can relate."

"To whom—me or him?" Nico asked sarcastically.

Salvatore shrugged one shoulder, unbothered. "To loving someone even when they hate you."

Those words landed like a sucker punch to Nico's gut and he wanted to disappear. Just... *go*.

Salvatore moved in for the kill. "A ten-year-old boy doesn't hug his father after he's been beaten by him for doing nothing wrong, and apologize, if he doesn't love him."

Nico hated the way he could still see his father coming at him in the small bathroom, hands swinging and rage overflowing. The surface of his skin electrified with the very thought of the memory, and then it was like he had been put right back in it. Hands shaking, stomach clenching and him…pleading. It made breathing hard. It made everything in the corners of his vision fuzzy while he tried to sit through it and let the moment pass.

Flexing his left hand gave him something to focus on other than the memories replaying in his mind, and the man who had yet to look away from him.

"You're not okay, are you?" Salvatore asked.

He thought of the man's daughter, and what she'd done to herself last night.

"A lot of us aren't."

"That's fair, but I'm the one handling you, remember?"

"You can't fix me. People have tried."

A chuckle echoed from behind the desk. "Right. You mean the fifth and last high school where you weren't allowed to return to without a therapist's oversight. And the doctor who put you on a mood stabilizer and went through round after round of antidepressants for two years. That's who you mean when you say they tried, don't you?"

Nico's stare narrowed. "Are you trying to piss me off?"

"I'm trying to figure you out," Sal replied.

"Let me know if you find the trick," Nico said low. "I'd like to have it for future reference."

That earned him another soft laugh from Salvatore. "You know, I think I could like you, Nico."

"I'm still undecided," he replied.

That was a lie.

He'd decided years ago that he liked Sal. The same night he hugged a broken, sad boy, told him it was okay, and tried to apologize. Something no other man in his life had done for him up until that moment. Walking into that same man's office to see the photographs of his daughter proudly displayed only cemented Nico's feelings.

Salvatore grinned. "I don't need you to like me. What I need from you boils down to three things. If you care to hear them."

Nico considered it. "I'm a taker, Sal. I rarely give, and if I do, I'm gonna take to make up for it."

"A bargain, then?"

That piqued his interest. "What do you mean?"

Sal put his pointer finger up to his lips and then tipped it like a bullet coming in Nico's direction. "Give me three reasonable things that you want, and I'll tell you three equally reasonable things I expect in return for you to earn them."

"*Earn*—"

"Are we bargaining or bitching?"

Nico drank the last gulp of coffee from his cup. "Any restrictions?"

It took Salvatore a moment to respond. "If your name doesn't control access to it, then I'm shit out of luck. Or you are, whatever."

"I want my vehicles. For obvious reasons. Also, I'd like to see my sister. That one might not be so easy, given my father won't even speak to me, but I can work up to it."

"All right. And your last thing?"

Nico didn't even have to think about it. It was a pipe dream, and he knew it. A carrot that hadn't even been dangled for him when the chaos of his life dominated what he could have been if things were different.

"The button."

He wanted his in. He wanted to be made. *A made man*.

"In that order?" Salvatore asked.

Nico laughed. "Any order."

A nod answered him back. "Okay, here are mine. These aren't in any order because they're all equally important, and there are no exceptions. Are we clear?"

"Like crystal."

"One—respect."

"Could have guessed it," Nico said.

Sal didn't even smile. "The way you behave reflects on me. Perhaps you don't care that people see your father through a view of your making, and maybe he's earned it, but I'm not him. I don't care if you hate the person looking you straight in the face, you keep that shit to yourself. Understood?"

"Got it. Two?"

"Stop, drop, and roll, kiddo. If I say jump, you ask how high. No questions asked."

Nico's jaw clenched. "I'm not a child."

"Do you think you're ever gonna get the button if you can't follow a simple order, hmm?"

He had a point. "And three?" Nico asked, opting to leave number two up to his own discretion.

"Three is the one that matters, personally, to me the most."

"Okay."

Sal exhaled slowly. "No lying. Ever. Again, no exceptions. If I ask, you tell. If something's happened, I need to know. Omission is still lying. Changing a detail for whatever reason is still a lie. I need honesty. I've got enough bullshit on my plate coming from every corner of life, be the one thing that I don't have to worry about catching me up in something I could have done without. Simple."

"Yeah, simple," he echoed.

"Good. Let's test it."

Nico straightened in the chair, placing the mug to the glass coffee table. "How?"

"Last night," Sal stated, "what were you doing?"

"Scouting. It took thirty minutes before I got bored, and you didn't say I couldn't go outside. You just said I couldn't leave the walled-in section."

"Yet, you did jump over the wall."

Nico shrugged. "I thought I had a good reason to."

"Yes, my daughter. Remember what I said, omitting is still a lie."

His chest became tighter. Nico sucked on his teeth before asking, "What, do you want a play by play of what went down, or…?"

"I'm just trying to figure out the details that Larkin couldn't fill in for me this morning."

"Who's omitting now?"

Surprise flitted across Salvatore's face. "Excuse me?"

"What you're not saying, and what I already figured out last night while scouting, is that you have a blind spot in your cameras back there."

At that, Salvatore sat back in the leather chair and wove his fingers together, staying silent.

"Right in the area I chose to be. The two closest cameras weren't moving like others I saw, and so I figured the gate between the two sections, nearby hose, and the pin cherry tree all happened to be in that blind spot. I wondered how long it would take before someone came looking. They had to know I was outside; I needed to use the fob to open the door leading to the back, after all."

"All because you were bored, huh?"

"I could have done worse," Nico admitted and to others, he had.

Salvatore rubbed at his mouth a little. "And Frankie just what, came upon you?"

Yeah, *shit*. Nico hadn't thought this far. He'd just made a deal not to lie, too.

"Not really. I mean, you know she runs, right?" Nico asked, wondering if the man could fill in his own blanks regarding his daughter's secret.

Salvatore said nothing.

"Because that's what she was doing. For an hour. Maybe a little more or a little less. I wasn't exactly trying to get her attention. That just happened to be where she stopped. My guess is, because she also knows your cameras aren't picking her up there. You're not seeing how the running ends."

Without warning, Salvatore leaned forward and jammed a finger against the phone on the desk. Almost instantly, a buzz echoed, and a voice came over the speaker.

"Yes, Mr. Gallo?"

"Sissy, could I have a word?"

"Sure, I'll be—"

"Now."

Nico moved to stand. "Should I go or not?"

"Sit."

He did. Stop, drop, and roll, after all.

Less than two minutes later, a knock echoed on the office doors. The maid, or whatever she was, given her comfortable, casual clothing, didn't wait to be called in before she opened the door. As if she had done this very thing many times before and knew it wouldn't be a problem.

Her dark eyes scanned the room, picking up on Nico quickly, and then moving onto Salvatore where she didn't look away. "Yes?"

"When did Francesca get home yesterday?"

"Right after her game."

"Who brought her home?"

"The boyfriend."

Nico made a face that no one else noticed. A *boyfriend*? He bet that asshole played football and looked like a good face to punch.

"And then what did she do?" Salvatore questioned, steely eyes never wavering from their target.

"Had a snack while we chatted a bit."

"About?"

"Is there a problem?"

Salvatore's lips pursed, his expression fading into a blank canvas. "I don't know, Sissy. Is there one? Is there something I should know?"

Nico glanced over his shoulder just in time to see the woman wring her hands together. "She's been running again…she usually does when you're gone. But you know that, you know she—"

"I *know* she's ten pounds underweight, practices a minimum of four days a week, three hours a shot, and doesn't have any fucking reason to be running herself sick. Just like you know it, too! We've been over this, Sissy. She needs to find better ways to cope."

"And she does. When you're home."

A fist slammed against the desk. "*Fuck*!"

That was Nico's cue. He stood up, scratching at the side of his cheek out of awkwardness. "I'm gonna go back to the guesthouse now, if that's all right?"

Sal barely passed him a look. "I'll call for Larkin. You stay in the hallway. I want one month where you do exactly as I say, and we'll see about getting a start on what you want. Got it?"

Nico nodded fast. "Yeah, I got it."

Then, his attention turned on Sissy again. "And you—you get my daughter up, right now."

"But Sal—"

"*Now*."

Even he moved his ass to get out of that office. Nico heard a lot of men use a certain type of voice to be heard and command attention. His own father had a special tone he reserved for Nico as well, but even that, fists and all, didn't put the fear of God into him the way Salvatore just did.

Now he felt bad.

Except what Frankie did, it wasn't good. Clearly, those around her understood as much, too. If she cared to hear it, then he would apologize for his part another time.

Nico still leaned against the wall outside the office, next to the opened door, waiting for Larkin to show up when Frankie appeared at the end of the hallway. Still in silk pajama shorts and a tank, and pink slides, her hair looked slept in. She seemed to have shrunk in on herself overnight. With her head down, she picked at the side of her thumbnail and only stopped when she was close enough that her field of vision caught sight of Nico's footwear.

She glanced up, wet eyes already rimmed with tears. The time to apologize was now. Nico chewed on his inner cheek, and mumbled, "I'm sorry."

It wasn't good enough. He could tell before she said a thing.

"Yeah, well, fuck you, too."

He let her have that and took it in silence. She strolled past him with her chin up and headed inside Salvatore's office. The yelling started immediately, carrying out where he heard every aching word.

One, hateful.

The other, pleading.

Nico got it, then. He understood. Sal's common ground? His daughter. Sometimes she hated him. He loved her, anyway.