

**Brutal**  
**Salvatore Falzone**

Translated by Jessica Gatti

## CHAPTER 1

It was his friend Gianluca who first suggested he start an OnlyFans. He said it as a joke, after downing the last drop of amaro left in his glass.

Paolo had clocked out only ten minutes earlier, his shirt still reeking of tomato sauce and fryer grease. He had been talking about how much he hated his job, how much he hated the smell of sauce and fried food that clung to his clothes, when Gianluca brought up OnlyFans. He and Paolo were sitting outside a bar. It was eleven-thirty on a Friday night, and the streets of Vigevano were still crowded and loud. Almost all the tables on the terrace were taken up, for the most part by kids in white shirts and cuffed jeans; Paolo and Gianluca had to raise their voices to talk. The air was warm, heavy, coating the skin with a sticky layer.

«Even a guy from my town opened one», Gianluca said. He was blond, with a shade so light it almost revealed the pale whiteness of his scalp. Every time he drank alcohol, his pale cheeks would flush a deep, blood-red, making him look like he had some kind of skin disease. «His Instagram is full of pictures and videos of him in luxury hotels in Malta, Greece, places like that».

«Shit», Paolo said. He hadn't even finished half of his amaro, and his head was already spinning.

«Yeah», Gianluca replied. He reached for Paolo's lighter and lit a cigarette. Paolo gestured for him to put the lighter back where it was, and his friend obeyed with a sly smile.

«But what kind of videos does he make?» Paolo asked.

«You know, videos with men», Gianluca replied. He smoked holding the filter of the cigarette between his thumb and index finger, his legs spread wide, his eyes half-closed from the smoke.

«He's gay».

«Ah».

«Yeah», Gianluca said, laughing. The smoke went down the wrong way, and he coughed, drawing the attention of some girls at the table next to them. He raised a hand to apologize. «But maybe you know him», he continued after clearing his throat. «His name's Francesco. I don't remember his last name». He stretched out a leg to pull his phone from his jeans pocket. He placed it on the table and started messing around on Instagram; then, when he finally found the profile he was looking for, he showed it to Paolo. «Dalmasso», he said. «That's the last name».

Paolo squinted to focus. The name didn't ring a bell, but the profile picture, on the other hand, reminded him of someone – a tall, skinny guy a year younger, the best friend of one of his first girlfriends back in high school. And sure enough, Chiara, the girl in question, was among the people following Francesco.

Back then, the two always traveled in pairs, often arm in arm. She called him «fag», and he called her «slut». He always wore plain cardigans over shirts and t-shirts with bright patterns, walking through the city with a swagger.

When Paolo asked Chiara to go out, she always asked if she could invite Francesco. It was Paolo who was the third wheel on those occasions, the one who looked around bored while Chiara and Francesco gossiped.

«Oh, shit», Paolo said as he scrolled through the photos.

In some of them, Francesco smiled at the camera in the same way: one eye closed, an arm raised, hand hidden behind his head; in others, he was naked next to men much bigger and taller than him; in others, Francesco didn't appear at all: there were photos of brightly lit hotel rooms, messy beds, and views of the sea.

«Be careful not to like anything», Gianluca said.

«I'm not dumb», Paolo said, without taking his eyes off the phone screen.

«You never know». Gianluca took one last drag and stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray at the center of the table. «Did you see that?» he asked, exhaling smoke through his nose.

«I saw, yeah».

«That guy makes a ton of money. In an interview, he said he pulls in around twenty thousand dollars a month».

Paolo looked up. «Seriously?».

«Swear to God», Gianluca replied. He was watching the entrance of the bar behind Paolo, waiting for a waiter to step out onto the patio. «Go read the interview if you don't believe me».

«I believe you, I believe you», Paolo said.

He handed the phone back to his friend and leaned into the back of his chair. He lit a cigarette himself, and for a few seconds, he just stared at Gianluca's phone in silence, absentmindedly running his thumb along the inside of his cheek.

Who would've thought that Francesco Dalmasso would be making twenty grand a month shooting videos where he got fucked? Certainly not him. He'd thought that guy would become a doctor, or an engineer, or a teacher – because he was smart, and whenever he turned down Chiara's invitations to go out, it was always to study. Only when he didn't see him for days and Chiara barely mentioned him did Paolo ever wonder whether Francesco had hanged himself or if someone had beaten him up on the street.

«Can't say he's stupid», he now said. He took a long drag and exhaled the smoke toward the sky without tilting his head back. «If I were gay, I'd be making videos on OnlyFans too».

«You don't have to be gay to make videos on OnlyFans», Gianluca shot back.

The girls at the next table glanced over again; one of them shook her head.

«Yeah, sure».

«I mean, if someone really needs the money...».

Paolo, suddenly tense, stared at him the same way the girls had a moment earlier. But when he saw Gianluca's mouth twitch downward, he burst out laughing and waved him off.

«Don't talk shit», he said.

Gianluca burst out laughing as well; this time, the girls didn't just glare at them – they got up and went inside to pay. Finally, though, a waiter stepped out onto the terrace, and Gianluca was able to order another glass of amaro.

The two of them raised a toast to Francesco Dalmasso.

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When he got home, the house was dark and silent. He shut the front door behind him and, clenching his teeth, slowly turned the key in the lock. He didn't want to wake Martina – waking her up would mean answering the usual barrage of questions, starting with an apparently harmless «Who were you with?» and ending in a tearful «Why are you avoiding me?».

Paolo tried to slip off his shoes without using his hands, but he nearly lost his balance and had to grab onto the hallway cabinet. He had drunk too much, his head was spinning. After forcing down that first glass of amaro, Gianluca had ordered him another. «You only live once», he had said.

Shoes off, Paolo walked over to the window in the tiny kitchen. When he had stepped inside a moment earlier, he had noticed that all the windows on the other side of the house – the part where his mother and grandmother lived – were dark. The only exception, as always, was his grandmother's bedroom, faintly illuminated by the bluish glow of the TV, still on. She could only fall asleep watching late-night infomercials for watches and jewelry that played on the channels beyond the hundredth.

His father had left when Paolo was fourteen. One evening, his mother had finally made up her mind and stuffed his clothes into a couple of black garbage bags. When he arrived, she hadn't even let him in. She had told him to take his things and go. Paolo was happy. For years, he had imagined that moment. For years, he had clung to that image to survive their arguments and the heavy silences between them. His father spent his afternoons slumped in bars – he had a passion for slot machines. On the rare occasions when he won, he would come home and tell Paolo and his mother to get ready because he was taking them out to eat. He would take them to a pizzeria or McDonald's, claiming his paycheck had come in, but Paolo knew that wasn't true. The many times he lost, he would come home with a dark look on his face, casting angry glances, yelling, slamming the front door on his way out. Paolo hated him with a fierce, burning hatred. He often dreamed of killing him with his bare hands – of strangling him, stabbing him. His mother had only found the courage to leave him after discovering that he had stolen a gold ring she kept in the safe. She hadn't even confronted him about it; she just wanted to cut him out of her life with a clean break. He had screamed in the courtyard for at least an hour. Paolo and his mother had listened to his shouts, sitting on the floor by the entrance.

Now his father lived in Tuscany. He was engaged to a woman ten years younger than him, with tattooed eyebrows and fake teeth. Paolo had seen the pictures on Facebook. It had been at least seven years since the last time he had spoken to him on the phone. His father had called to ask if he was interested in starting a business together – maybe a bakery, maybe a bar. Paolo had told him not to call again. Now, he couldn't even remember the sound of his voice.

Paolo left the tiny kitchen and sat down on the couch in the small living room. The place where he and Martina had been living for just over a year wasn't a real home, but a garage his mother had converted into a small one-bedroom apartment. Before they moved in, the walls separating the kitchenette from the living room and the living room from the bedroom hadn't existed –

there had only been the tiny bathroom, a cramped two-square-meter space where, by some miracle, they had managed to fit a shower tray.

His mother had paid for the renovations. She had done it because she knew that only by paying would she be able to convince Paolo and Martina to move in. Convincing Martina had been particularly difficult; she had wanted to rent a place somewhere else, not necessarily in the city center. She said that was the only way they would truly be independent. She said that her parents, just before she was born, had made the mistake of living for a few months in her grandparents' house, and that those months had been wasted – robbed of any trace of intimacy in their relationship.

Paolo had told her it would only be temporary. Living in that converted garage for a couple of years would allow him to save up enough money to rent or even buy a nice place, maybe close to the center.

«And besides, it's not like my mother would be living here with us», he had pointed out.

Now, every time his mother knocked on the door that connected his bedroom to theirs, and it happened at least a couple of times a day, Martina would just give Paolo a dirty look.

Paolo stretched his legs and rested his head on the back of the couch. Just above, hanging on the wall, was a mosaic of photographs depicting him and Martina over the years: the oldest photo had been taken ten years earlier, in a park, he was smiling and resting his forehead on her cheek, she was saying something. They were sixteen years old.

Paolo sighed deeply.

He was thinking about Francesco Dalmasso. Images of Francesco walking through the center wiggling his butt, alternated with more recent images on his Instagram profile. To Paolo he seemed so small and fragile, next to those big guys. In one of the photos, one of them was holding Francesco in his arms, and how giggly Francesco was, hanging from that taurine neck.

Paolo turned his head to the other side as if trying to free himself from those images. The images, however, not only did not abandon him, but multiplied: Francesco, lying on a hotel bed, his feet in the air; Francesco moving his hands in exaggerated gestures, sitting at the table of some bar; Francesco smiling at the camera with one eye closed and his teeth whitened.

Paolo pulled his phone out of the jeans pocket. He searched on Google: *Francesco Dalmasso OnlyFans*. The first link led to Francesco's Instagram profile, the second to an interview he had given to Fanpage.it. It was probably the same interview Gianluca had told him about at the bar, the title said, in quotes: *I, a gay guy from the province, earned twenty thousand dollars in a month on OnlyFans*.

Paolo ignored Instagram and the interview and clicked directly on the third link, which led to the OnlyFans account. He immediately noticed that Francesco had used a sort of stage name: on the platform, in fact, he was called Frankie Bare.

In the photo, Francesco, kneeling, had his back to the camera, his bare and glabrous buttocks in the foreground. Just below, in the space reserved for his bio, he had written, first in Italian and then in English: *The bigger the dick, the more I like to take it. Every week a new video, always of quality, always thirty minutes or more. Even extreme sex. I collaborate monthly with dominant active partners both Italian and foreign*.

Each paragraph began with either a devil emoji or a fire emoji.

Paolo, not being a subscriber, couldn't watch any of the hundred videos Francesco had uploaded to the platform. OnlyFans didn't offer free trials: to watch, you had to pay; in Francesco's case, the monthly subscription was nine dollars – there was, for that week only, a 5% discount.

No way was Paolo going to pay.

He went back to Google and searched: *how to make money on OnlyFans*. He spent the next two hours reading interviews and watching commentary videos on YouTube. He discovered

that on OnlyFans, creators didn't earn just through subscriptions, but also through unlockable content, meaning you had to pay for it separately, like photographs and videos different from the usual ones. Moreover, there was the possibility to chat directly with subscribers, who could pay to receive exclusive videos or photos (one creator, Paolo read in an interview, had been asked to swallow a still-living fish for five hundred dollars, another had been asked to get a cock tattooed on his ass). Paolo also discovered that, since gay men were major users of the platform, male creators, whether straight or gay, were often asked to shoot sex scenes with other guys.

But above all, Paolo discovered that to make money on OnlyFans (money that, even for Italian creators, was in dollars) you already had to have a good following on other social networks, especially on Instagram, and he didn't even reach two hundred followers on Instagram. The alternative, a girl explained in her blog, was to collaborate with someone already known on the platform.

That thought took him by surprise. Paolo, as if waking up from a nightmare, jumped up from the couch. He went to the bathroom, lowered his pants and underwear and sat on the toilet even though he didn't actually have to pee. He remained seated for a few minutes, staring into space; then he dressed up again and returned to the living room. He glanced at the clock hanging on the wall: it was half past four in the morning. In the kitchenette, he opened the small window above the sink and lit a cigarette. He gazed at the small villa across the street, recently renovated.

Ever since his father had left, his mother had started using a calculator at the supermarket to avoid exceeding the weekly budget; thus, in his mind, the thought of money had become inextricably linked to that of calculation: the calculation of how much money he had in his account, the calculation of how much he would spend, the calculation of how much would remain after buying something. After a purchase, there was always a sense of guilt, and the

sense of guilt could only be alleviated by canceling the purchase: he had lost count of the times he had returned to a store to ask for a refund for the item he had bought.

Even now, buying involved a certain anxiety. Paolo never bought a pair of jeans without thinking about it too much, just because he liked them; with Martina, who worked as an intern in a training center for six hundred euros a month, he never took vacations outside of Italy. When his friends' birthdays approached, he would panic. He hadn't gone to the wedding of a former high school classmate because he couldn't afford to spend a hundred euros on the wedding gift – and besides, he didn't own a suit.

Probably, Francesco spent money lightly; probably he didn't do any calculations. Paolo thought back to the hotel rooms, the whitened teeth, the gold chain hanging from his neck. He thought back to his bare buttocks, the men towering next to him, the phrase *I collaborate monthly with dominant active partners both Italian and foreign*.

It was now clear that to make money on OnlyFans he would have to collaborate with those who were already famous on the platform. Making videos on his own, Paolo, who had four hundred friends on Facebook and one hundred and ninety-two followers on Instagram, would never earn much; perhaps with monthly subscriptions he would reach a hundred dollars, but a hundred dollars would certainly not change his life.

Twenty thousand euros would. With a salary of twenty thousand euros, Francesco could have quit his job, and Martina could have quit hers too, and together they would have moved to a house in the center of Vigevano, or maybe even Milan, where Paolo could have worked as a «content creator». He and Martina could have taken a trip every two weeks, to Malta and Greece and Spain, and even outside of Europe, why not.

Paolo put out his cigarette, closed the small window of the kitchenette and returned to the couch. Around him, the living room seemed to swirl. He had really overdone it with the alcohol.

He closed his eyes and massaged his eyelids with his fingers, his fingertips greasy with sebum mixed with sweat.

He fell asleep on the couch, sitting up. He dreamed of writing a message to Francesco, on Instagram; in the message he asked him if he remembered him and if he was interested in meeting him. *For work*, he specified.

When he woke up, the next morning, a notification appeared on his phone screen with Francesco's name. Paolo viewed the message without opening it.

*Of course I remember*, the message said. *Are you busy tomorrow?*