

Le Français Chapter 69-73

By BreaktheBar

Commissioned by ThL

Chapter 69

Marc watched as Sinead returned to the bar and her new acquaintance, the hockey player's partner. For just a moment he mused at what it might have been like to have them both in his bed - the other woman was certainly attractive and seemed to be a spirited flirt as she welcomed Sinead back with a wink and a playful pat on the hip. But, for all that Marc knew that he was something of a deviant, he also wasn't the kind of man who would never consider approaching someone who was clearly engaged in some sort of relationship.

Which made the actions of the man trying to horn in on Sinead all the more despicable to him.

Keeping an eye on Sinead out of the corner of his eye, Marc paid the small blind for his next hand and then received his cards. A seven of spades and a two of diamonds wasn't worth anything, so he folded quietly at the first opportunity. The action at the table was slow to develop this time, with Susan slow-playing her bets as she eyed the other players from across the table.

The Irishman wasn't *quite* stepping over the line of propriety, but he was definitely pushing it. He was standing next to Sinead at the bar and Marc could tell that he was stopping himself from going so far as to put a hand on Sinead's back, but otherwise was putting 'the moves' on both Sinead and her friend. Marc wasn't entirely sure what the man was thinking, other than the fact that he must have been thinking with his dick. It was the only reasonable explanation other than that the man felt 'untouchable' for some reason. Maybe because Marc wasn't a known criminal element, and neither was the hockey player?

Susan took in a small victory at the end of the hand, refilling her chip pool, and another hand was dealt out. This time Marc had pocket 10s so he stayed in, and was slightly more distracted as he had to pay attention. By the end of the hand, he ended up with two pairs, not awful by any means, but the ferocity of the hockey player and the Jamaican allowed him to realise that at least one of them must have had the potential straight that was showing if not something more. He folded and escaped from the betting before it skyrocketed. When he looked back over at the bar he saw Sinead shoving the Irishman's hand from her forearm and her quietly scolding him.

Marc cleared his throat, looking over at the two Italian gentlemen at his table. He didn't really know much about 'the Mafia' beyond popular culture references and was unsure if his partial watch-through of The Sopranos really gave him any insight at all into how the Toronto Mafia operated, but he wasn't about to take a blind risk without checking. "Excuse me," he said once

he had the attention of both men. "I believe the blond Irishman came with the two of you? He seems to be agitating my companion."

One of them just smirked at Marc. He was thin, with a severe face and nose that reminded Marc a little of a man he'd known growing up from Nice in southern France. The other, a more swarthy gentleman with thick black hair expertly coiffed on his head but also thick on his arms and knuckles. He frowned and looked over his shoulder at the bar, then called something sharp to the Irishman. Marc recognized that it was Italian, but it was so quick that he wasn't able to put his rusty, and small, knowledge of the language to use. "*Liam, tieni il cazzo nei pantaloni. Stai facendo incazzare i soldi facili.*"

The Irishman looked over, giving an innocent look to his boss, or superior, or whatever the man was to him. Then, when the Italian turned back to the table, 'Liam' made a slight grimace before slowly turning his back to Sinead and her acquaintance, acting as if he hadn't been flirting with the women at all.

"My apologies," the swarthy Italian said curtly, nodding. Marc nodded back in thanks. The man had spoken in quick, fluent Italian but was also clearly Canadian-born and raised when he swapped to English. Marc had a feeling he must have spent a significant amount of time in Italy, which he assumed would make sense if the man was truly a member of the Mafia.

The game continued on, and while Marc had a couple of solid winning hands to bolster his chip expenditures he didn't rake in any massive pots to put him back to his starting winnings. He wasn't, however, fairsing too poorly. Susan seemed to almost take pity on the businessman Paul Crane as she took him out of the action on a hand that Marc could have read from across the room. The man took it jovially, shaking the hockey player's hand energetically and repeating that he'd been thrilled to meet the veteran of the game.

Other players were getting knocked off from the two other tables as well. Some stuck around, clearly enjoying the atmosphere and the free drinks, and Marc noted the hostess Rachel circulating between both the tables and the guests, while Victor paid specific attention to the players who were getting knocked out. *Smoothing over frustrated feelings, or discussing 'business?'* Marc thought.

Marc finally found another hand for himself that was worth pursuing, particularly since he'd been the big blind and had to chip in. The King and Queen of Diamonds sat on the table in front of him, and he ended up facing off with the thin Calabrian, the hockey player, and Susan. The flop gave Marc another two diamonds, though neither were the 10, Jack or Ace so a Royal Flush was out of the question. That still left him a possible Flush however if he could squeak out one more diamond from the turn or river. The betting accelerated, pausing at Susan before she called, and the pot ended up at \$3,300 before the turn. The dealer expertly burned a card and then revealed the turn, a king of spades. By Marc's quick math, it shouldn't have helped anyone make a potential hand unless someone had pocket kings handing them a three-of-a-kind. Since he was holding a king himself, it wasn't very likely someone else had the other two.

The hockey player backed out, passing the betting to the Italian, who took the initiative. Susan took a long moment to consider before matching, and Marc took his own moment to run calculations in his head while watching the thin man. In the end, Marc had to just go with his gut - he was risking a significant portion of his chips already and had to bank on a diamond being the final card for the river. It was almost impossible to know what the actual percentage chance of it *being* a diamond was considering all the other cards that had been dealt out and folded, plus the burned cards, but in the end, he could only plan so far.

And instinct had never truly led him astray before.

“Raise,” he said, quickly separating out the chip. “One thousand even.”

Chapter 70

There was a small round of clapping over at Marc's table, pulling Sinead and Siobhan's attention.

"Looks like your man just won a good hand," Siobhan said, flashing a grin at Sinead.

She was probably right; Sinead could see Marc smiling and nodding his acceptance at some sort of smart play he'd made. No one was standing up and leaving the table, so he must not have knocked someone out, which Sinead was thankful for - she already felt like she was sticking out too much.

"Someone's getting lucky tonight," Destiny said. She was a gorgeous woman of Pakistani descent and one of the two escorts who had eventually come over to join Sinead and Siobhan at the bar. The woman was wearing a dress that looked like she must have been sewn into it, and the telltale bumps of nipple piercings fronted the considerable expanse of warm, brown cleavage she was showing off.

"Aw, she's blushing," Spirit chuckled. "Leave Sinead alone." The other escort, and friend of Destiny, was a leggy blonde with a similar sized chest though hers were definitely 'aftermarket.'

"Funny," Siobhan said, flashing the ladies a playful smile. "I thought it was you two who would be getting lucky."

"Not me," Spirit sighed with a little roll of her eyes. "I mean, don't get me wrong, Cornelius is a fun time. He takes me out to nice dinners, buys me nice things, etcetera. But the sex? *When* it happens, which is only sometimes, isn't exactly 'getting lucky.'" Spirit was the companion for a businessman who looked to be in his mid-sixties, so Sinead was a little surprised that sex wasn't on the man's mind more often with a pair of legs and tits like Spirit was walking around with.

"I'll be getting a proper fucking tonight," Destiny smirked. She'd pretended to be circumspect, but Spirit had spilt that she was there with the Mayor's Aide so Destiny wasn't trying to hide it so much. "Not that I'd call it 'getting lucky' either."

"A woman like you *deserves* to get lucky," Siobhan said, still tipsy. "Honestly, you two - you're *fuckin' hot*."

The two escorts grinned at the earnest compliment and preened a little. They'd originally come over slightly tentatively, not because they were shy or nervous but rather because they'd been getting the cold shoulder from some of the other women in the room. Apparently, models and Instagram influencers felt like there was some sort of social distinction between them and actual escorts - the way Sinead saw it, most of the 'models' were getting paid to be there as well so there really wasn't all that much of a difference.

The reality of the situation overall, as the conversation went on, was that Sinead was having fun. Part of her, the part that wanted to be grinding away on a case, was whispering that she should be trying to build more connections with Destiny and Spirit - they were technically criminals. She could flip them to be CIs. They could inform on their clients, or whatever organisation they worked for (if they did.) Strippers and escorts could learn things that girlfriends and wives often couldn't.

But... it just didn't *fit* at the moment. Sinead wondered if it was something to do with her undercover persona she was putting on, or the fact that she genuinely found herself just *liking* the energy the two of them gave off. A little snarky, a little sweet, and funny - talking with them and Siobhan felt a lot like talking with Jules.

"Oh, there goes another one," Sinead said, changing the conversation again as she nodded towards the table where Destiny's client was playing. Andrea Stanhope was playing at the same table, and as the man stood up he seemed to be grimacing in the younger woman's direction. One of the Native players was also talking loudly, almost aggressively, at the dealer. Rachel, the blonde host, didn't quite rush over but definitely made a beeline for the table to start smoothing things over.

"God, I wish they could keep the testosterone to a low simmer," Spirit said, rolling her eyes.

"What, and admit that women are better at them at games that involve skill?" Siobhan asked with a grin. "I'd bet both of you could fleece the pants off of any of them."

Destiny and Spirit both preened again at the compliment and didn't argue. Then they ordered a round of shots, and Sinead found herself swept back into the drinking.

She wasn't *tipsy*, she just wasn't entirely graceful at the moment. At least, that's what Sinead told herself as she threaded her way through the poker room. The official break time had been called, and there were fourteen players still standing.

Marc met her halfway between the bar and the table. "*Ma petite rebelle*," he said, and she almost got lost in his accent for a moment. "I could have come to you."

Sinead rolled her eyes. "I actually need to talk to your fellow player," she said. "Though, now that you mention it, didn't I say I could handle that douche?"

He gave her a look. "And did I not say that you shouldn't need to?" he pointed out. She had actually forgotten that, and him reminding her made her feel that same little warm rush of something. It was an ephemeral feeling, not quite butterflies in her stomach, not quite getting horny, but definitely something like it. "Now, who do you need to talk to?"

“Siobhan’s boyfriend,” Sinead said, then realised she needed to clarify. ‘The hockey player.’”

“Ah, well, you missed him in the crowd,” Marc said, nodding back towards the bar. He led her through the conversation groups that had formed and they found the hockey player at the bar with Siobhan. Destiny and Spirit had drifted off to pay attention to the men that had brought them.

Sinead had been intending to quietly tell Siobhan’s boyfriend that Siobhan was more drunk than she seemed - not that she wanted to tattle on the other woman, but more out of concern for her. Drunk Siobhan was a bit of a flirt and if that Irish asshole came back around Sinead didn’t like the idea of him getting more of a response from the blonde.

“Baby, I’m *horny*,” Siobhan said. Not quietly.

The hockey player looked at us, a little embarrassed but with just a hint of playful pride that his smoking hot girlfriend was basically begging him for sex.

Guess I don’t need to worry about warning him, Sinead thought to herself with a smirk. She glanced at Marc, who glanced back, and she considered doing the same thing to him. But the look in his eye said if she did it, she’d pay for it, and that scared her a little. In a good way, but still scary enough that she just shook her head and laughed.

Chapter 71

The kiss on the lips from Siobhan had been a surprise, as had the insistence that Sinead needed to text her the next day. The hockey player - whose name still evaded Sinead - had decided to gracefully bow out of the poker tournament, abandoning his chips in favour of taking his girlfriend home to satiate her tipsy lust.

"You seemed friendly with her," Marc said, standing close to Sinead as they both sipped on fresh glasses of wine. It was fragrant and fruity and Sinead knew she didn't really need another glass, but Marc had presented it to her so she'd taken it. She didn't respond right away because she was focused on the feeling of Marc's hand on her back, pressing through her blouse, and how it felt. "Sinead?"

"Mm," she grunted softly, then looked up at him. "Siobhan is... bright. And lovely. I could see being friends with her, though I don't think that exactly makes sense considering I'm supposed to be... you know."

"Ah," Marc nodded slowly. "Well, I could see why that would cause a hesitation."

"Yeah," Sinead said. She was 'undercover' using her real first name. To be fair, the connection likely wouldn't even be made, but 'wouldn't likely' wasn't something to bank on.

"Still, you've only ever talked about Jules as someone you spend time with," Marc said. "And you could likely do worse for a new friend."

"Because *your* friendship has gone so awry?" Sinead challenged him a little, smirking and raising an eyebrow.

"Oh, *ma petite rebelle*," Marc sighed, giving her that damn smile. "*Friends* seems so strong, and yet so weak, to describe us."

Sinead shook her head, still smirking. He wasn't wrong. They really barely knew each other; she couldn't say they were 'dating' or 'seeing each other' really. What they were doing wasn't *romantic*. Well, not in a relationship sense.

But then there was the way he made her *feel*...

"Have you found anything out?" Sinead asked quietly, pivoting the conversation. They had stepped away from the bar so they weren't in the thick of things, and she spoke softly but without whispering so that her voice wouldn't sound out of place to anyone else and could just blend into the other conversations in the room.

Marc raised an eyebrow. "More than we already have? No, I don't believe so. There isn't much small talk over the table. Unless you're interested in who seems to be having issues with each other."

Sinead hesitated then shook her head. "Your thoughts on that later would be fine. The real question is what he *does*."

"Marc," the older woman who was playing at Marc's table said, coming over. Sinead immediately got a sense of fierce personality from her even though she was easily over sixty and walked with a cane. One of the two big Samoan men was standing deferentially behind her and holding her purse. "Please introduce me to this lovely young woman sharing your arm this evening."

Marc smiled, nodding politely and turning a little to gesture to Sinead. "Susan," he said. "This is my companion for the evening, Miss Sinead. Sinead, Susan Steinmeyer, shrewd cardplayer and accomplished businesswoman."

"Flattery," Susan said, rolling her eyes dramatically as she shook hands with Sinead. "Watch yourself with this one, red. He's something of a shark."

"Oh, I know," Sinead said, giving the older woman a smile.

They chatted for a bit, Susan prodding Sinead for a little more information and both her and Marc deftly avoiding giving away too much. Marc didn't hide the fact that he was in Finance and that Victor had invited him since Marc was doing a little contract work for him, but he also didn't disclose any information about it. Sinead had more to dodge, since she couldn't talk about work, so she pivoted to the tried and true method of keeping someone talking about themselves so you didn't have to spill your own secrets.

By the time the break ended they'd learned a bit more about Susan's business, and also been joined by Marc's business associate Gregory Stanhope and his daughter.

"From what I understand, you're something of a maverick, dear," Susan said, patting Andrea's hand and then winking. "Keep it up, I'm sure we'll clash at the final table."

"That suggests I might *not* make it," Marc said with a teasing smile.

"I didn't say you wouldn't be there too, *monsieur*," Susan said. "Just that I'll enjoy it when the table I'm playing at has a young, fresh face and not yet another man."

The players had to get back to their tables, and Sinead ended up wandering back to the bar alongside Gregory. "She's been playing well," Sinead said, not a question.

“She had,” Gregory nodded. “Though I’m not so surprised about that. I’m more concerned about her knowing how to play well without raising her opponent’s ire. Or picking and choosing her battles.”

“Sportsmanship and honour only mean something if everyone values it,” Sinead said.

“Too true,” Gregory nodded, then glanced at her again as the hostess called for the games to begin again, noting that the Blinds were being raised. “This might be rude to ask,” Gregory continued, “But seeing Marc here without Felicity is a little surprising - is there something going on?”

“No,” Sinead said, shaking her head. “I- I haven’t met her, but as I understand it they have a very special relationship. Marc and I are just friends.”

It hurt to say that out loud, she realised.

She just wished she knew what that meant.

Chapter 72

The next round of hands was meant to last two hours, or until all three tables had dropped to three players. The final table of nine would then be formed, following the winner-take-all format. Marc settled in, Sinead having walked him to his spot again, and she leaned over and gave him a kiss on the cheek as her breasts rubbed against the back of his shoulders.

“Good luck,” she said quietly.

He smiled softly and turned to look at her, catching her hand and bringing it to his lips to kiss her fingers. “I don’t need luck,” he said. “I already have the prize in hand.”

She flushed, just a little, and gave him a little scowl at making such an open statement like that in front of other people. Susan just smirked knowingly from beside Marc, and he noticed a couple of the other players glance at Sinead as she walked away. Glances were fine, glances happened. Glances, in fact, simply made him proud to have her on his arm, as they always had with Felicity - and Felicity wore dresses that showed off *way* more to glance at.

The game got underway, and Marc lost track of time as the hands were dealt and played. He went up a little, then down a little, then down some more as Susan took a chunk out of his holdings. Then he came back up with a strong win that doubled his holdings and knocked the Native man out of the game. He looked frustrated, but took it like a gentleman and even came around to shake Marc’s hand.

That left four players at the table - Marc, Susan, the Jamaican gangster, and the swarthy Italian mobster.

One more player would need to get knocked off before they stopped for the final table. Around the room there was light conversation between the guests and the players that were still sticking around, and both other tables were still playing. Rachel, the thin blonde with the tits, was doing her rounds again and Victor was discussing something with the Natives, who seemed to be getting ready to leave. He was sure Sinead would have wanted to listen in on that conversation, but Victor had ushered them closer to the door and the presence of the two big guards would have made it awkward to try and sneak closer.

Three hands later, the first table had come to a conclusion - Gregory’s daughter Andrea seemed to have held her own as she, the member of the Hell’s Angels that Marc had spoken with before the game, and the baseball player from the Blue Jays were the ones left standing.

Two hands after that, Marc frowned. Not due to his cards, he was sitting on pocket Queens, but rather because the Irishman ‘Liam’ had approached Sinead again off to the side of the bar. Marc had been mildly keeping track of where the Detective was in the room between hands and he’d seen her speaking with various other guests, ‘pressing the flesh’ and ‘working the room’ so to speak. The Irishman had generally been keeping his distance from her since the earlier incident,

but Marc noticed him crossing the room with a purpose as he was trying to read the Jamaican across from him. The man crossed to the bar, put in an order, and then stepped away from the bar to approach Sinead, lifting a finger and tugging on the inside of her blouse collar from behind. Sinead spun to face him, one of her hands clenched into a fist, and Marc couldn't see her expression but could tell by her stance she was about ready to slap the man, if not worse.

Marc cleared his throat and looked across the table at the swarthy Italian he was still playing against. "Your guest is making unwanted advances towards my companion again," he said. "Are you going to deal with it appropriately, or am I going to need to do that myself?"

The Italian grimaced, looking past Marc towards where his fellow Calabrian was speaking to someone across the room, then back over his shoulder at the Irishman, as he was smirking down at Sinead and shaking his head, put his hand on Sinead's waist. She pushed him away and the Irishman laughed.

"If you think you can do it yourself, I'd be interested in seeing it," the Italian said. "No consequences from me or my friends, but I won't take any responsibility for what happens to you if you do."

"Mm," Marc grunted, tossing his pocket queens in as he folded out of order and stood up. "My apologies for the rudeness," he said to his fellow players, along with a meaningful glance at Susan since she was the only player he'd actually enjoyed meeting. He signalled to Rachel as he stepped away from the table, and she immediately approached with a frown on her face - she could see from a distance that Marc wasn't out of the game, but he also wasn't supposed to be leaving the table.

Before the blonde could say anything, Marc was moving towards the bar area. "I'll be withdrawing from the game," he said. "With apologies to the host."

"I-" she said, but finally saw what was going on and changed whatever she was going to say. "-Understand."

Sinead had swung her hand up to slap the Irishman but he'd caught her wrist. The Detective looked like she was about to turn that into a judo toss, but Marc got there first and seized the offending man's hand at the wrist in as iron a grip as he could muster. "*Excusez-moi*," Marc said. "You *will* remove your hand from my companion."

"Or what, y' fruity ponce?" the Irishman chuckled, wrenching his arm back from Marc's grip. "What are you going to do, fight me? You and what army?"

Marc could feel his face had turned to stone as he bore holes into the younger man with his gaze. He was somewhere in his mid-twenties and fit. Difficult to know if he was a gym rat dressed up in his clothes, but that didn't necessarily mean anything.

"I will if you make it necessary," Marc said evenly.

"Marc-" Sinead said, and he could hear the 'it's not necessary' in her tone.

"Buddy, you can't touch a fuckin' hair on my head and you know it," the Irishman smirked savagely.

"Actually, he can," the swarthy Italian called from the poker table. "I already told him so, Liam." The scene had taken the attention of the entire gambling hall.

"You feel like getting your head cracked open like an egg, old man?" Liam said, turning back after his initial surprise. "Winner takes home this sweet little tart."

"She'd tear you to pieces," Marc said, shaking his head. "But sometimes a man is put into a position where he needs to teach someone a lesson."

"Guys, please," Victor said, trying to barge into the conversation. He'd been outside and had come in at some point during the face-off. "This is supposed to be a fun night."

"Downstairs," Liam snarled. "So that when I knock you out standing up, you can fall back onto fuckin' concrete."

Marc looked at Victor. "Fun party," he said dryly.

Chapter 73

“Marc, this is insane,” Sinead hissed softly. She was clutching onto Marc’s arm tightly even though she was otherwise putting out an air of calm intensity. “We can just fucking *leave*.”

“Ah, we could,” Marc sighed. “But then I would have let that man put his hands on you, *ma petite rebelle*, when you didn’t want him to.”

“I told you I could have handled it myself,’ she said.

“And I told you that I knew that was the case, but that you shouldn’t need to,” Marc replied. They were out on the metal stairs outside the loft that held the gambling hall, walking down into the warehouse proper. The big bouncer woman and the scrawny rat-faced man were watching the parade coming down towards them with interest. Victor was in the lead with Liam and the skinny Italian, trying to work out whatever issue that this whole episode could cause for him or his relationships. Marc and Sinead were next, a few steps behind, followed by several of the guests and other onlookers who hadn’t stayed up by the tables.

“Fucking hell,” Sinead said, shaking her head. “Fucking *men*.”

Marc stopped at the bottom of the stairs and pulled her aside, away from the others as they headed more towards the centre of the mostly empty warehouse. “Sinead,” he said. “This is about your honour, but it’s not *just* about your honour. And certainly not my ego. Right now Victor and all of his contacts think I am just another one of his business world contacts, here to gamble away my money as I swim in dangerous waters for the fun of it. By doing this, I may draw the attention and respect of other criminal elements that I can then pass off to your capable hands.”

Sinead worked her jaw for a moment, obviously wanting to tell him off but still trying to process the completely new vector of explanation. To be fair, Victor had only really come up with it on their way down to the warehouse floor, but it was a pretty good one.

“Just...” she started, then shook her head. “Do you really think you can take him? Do you even know how to fight?”

Marc sucked in a long, slow breath and then let it out. “I haven’t trained nearly as much recently as I wish I might have, but I attained a black belt in karate about a decade and a half ago.”

“That’s not going to work in a street fight!” Sinead whispered angrily. “Marc-”

“I know,” Marc said, taking her by her upper arms and holding her firmly. “I know. This isn’t a tournament with rules for points, and respect. I’m not going to fall into that trap.”

Someone had thrown a switch and a few banks of lights in the centre of the warehouse came on with a mechanical clank and a hum of power, illuminating the bare concrete.

“Come on, you French fuck,” called the Irishman cockily. He’d already stripped off his suit jacket and was rolling up his shirt sleeves.

“What am I supposed to do if you actually get hurt?” Sinead asked sincerely.

“Take me to a hospital,” Marc said with a little smirk, trying to keep himself calm. Five minutes ago he was playing poker and it was a fine night. “Here, hold these for me please.” He took off the cufflinks from her shirts and handed them to her, then decided to take the shirt off entirely. Not letting the continued jeering from the Irishman rush him, he casually and neatly folded his shirt and handed it to Sinead, leaving him in his slacks and shoes. After a moment he decided to kick off the shoes as well - they were leather-soled dress shoes and were more likely to slip on the concrete than grip.

“You know, going out there completely naked would really establish your dominance,” Sinead said, a smirk creeping into her expression.

Marc snorted and then barked a laugh, just thinking about the look on everyone’s face if he did that. Instead of stripping down, he slid his arm around Sinead and pulled her close so that he could kiss her firmly. It felt astoundingly heroic to do that, and he left her gasping a little in exasperation as he turned and marched towards the three men in the centre of the warehouse.

“Come on then, you fuckin’ geezer,” the Irishman called, waving him closer with both hands. His forearms weren’t particularly bulky but he was wiry and had some tattoos that had been hidden by his sleeves. His shirt was half unbuttoned, showing off his equally wiry chest. “You fat French *fuck*. When you’re out cold on the floor, I’m gonna bend that little fire crotch bitch of yours over and fuck her ass, and she’ll be thankin’ me for showing her what a real man feels like.”

“Marc,” Victor said, holding up both hands as he stepped in the way. Everything in his voice said he was apologising for this, but wasn’t in a place to stop it.

“It’s fine, Victor,” Marc said, shifting the man out of the way and looking at the skinny Italian beside the Irishman. “Your compatriot upstairs said I won’t face any repercussions for this, other than what *this* is.”

The skinny man made a slight face, then frowned and shrugged as he nodded. “Fair enough.”

The Irishman glanced at his friend in mild surprise - he certainly seemed to think he was important enough to be protected by whatever honour code his Calabrian friends were, but Marc had guessed that there was a major difference in the ‘no touch’ policy Liam had protected himself with and what was actually implemented.

And Marc used that momentary shift in the Irishman's attention to lash out.

He could have punched the man in the face, though other than a strike to break the nose that was generally a bad idea with bare knuckles. He was more likely to break his own hand on Liam's face than do significant enough damage. Marc also didn't kick, though he might have had time to.

Instead, Marc slapped the ever-loving fuck out of the Irishman. It was a full-handed blow, the heel of his palm catching the chin, his palm striking across the cheek, and his fingers wrapping all the way up to the man's temple. The speed of it sent a cracking clap sound through the warehouse, and the force spun Liam half around and staggering to the side. Marc wondered if he might have actually cracked one of the man's teeth, or given him a mild concussion; it hadn't been the most powerful strike he could have made, sacrificing some raw strength for speed, but it had been effective and landed so cleanly.

Liam spit and turned back towards Marc, his lips bloody and his expression a rictus of rage. Cheek was already a bright pink-red. He growled and lifted his hands into a boxer's stance, coming at Marc with murderous intent.