



# Destruction (Crimson Bonds #1)

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**Category:** Action&Adventure

**Description:** Allies.

When Mafia Bosses Allesandro Martelli and Cristian Amato are kidnapped, their fledgling alliance is put to test as the once rivals are forced to rely on each other for survival.

Friends.

With the Bosses gone, Roman Amato and Emilio Martelli step up to lead their respective Families. They've both trained extensively for such a task, but reality is always worse. Forced to work together and trust each other as leaders and allies, rather than just friends, they quickly learn that Boss is more than a title and position, its a sacrifice.

Rivals.

The two Mafia Families were never meant to work so closely together, but in order to survive, the Martellis and Amatos need to go against everything they've ever been taught.

Without knowing who to trust, both the Bosses and the Families must rely on cooperation to make it through to the end... If they don't become their own worst enemies first.

**Total Pages (Source):** 39

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:04 am*

I slowly wake up and immediately touch the back of my head. Snarling at the pain and sticky feeling of blood, I blink my eyes open further. Fuck . I'm disoriented, but not to the point where I can't realize I'm in a bad situation.

"I wondered when you would wake up." I recognize that voice and turn toward it to see Cristian, the Head of the Amato Organization, sitting on the floor across from me.

"You sound far too amused." I sweep my gaze over him, noting the manacles on his ankles, one of which is attached to the wall. There's nothing in his eyes that shows any concern. Hell, if anything, he appears relaxed, like this is nothing more than a trip to the spa. Then again...

"I am amused. The fact someone managed to get the mighty Il Padrone? And that they would dare go after us both. Some people have the life expectancy of a fruit fly."

Snorting, I stand up from the cold floor, unsurprised that I need to shuffle, thanks to my own pair of manacles. Not the fashion accessory I'd choose. "Do we know who our gracious host is?"

Cristian lets out an aborted laugh as he shakes his head. "I was also unconscious when brought in. But considering the whispers we had been hearing... I don't think it would take many guesses."

"I suppose not. How did they manage to get you?" I lean against the wall, wishing we at least had some fucking chairs. A fucking concrete room with an obvious camera is so...cliché. There's no creativity to it.

“I was coming back from shopping; Carter’s birthday is in a few weeks and I’ve yet to find the perfect gift. Tennant isn’t going to let me live it down, as he doesn’t understand why I’m not content with shopping online. What about you?”

“I stopped to pick up wedding invitation samples. That’s the last thing I remember. I suspect my guards are dead. Or they will be as soon as my fiancé gets ahold of them.”

“Ah, yes. Your Lio does not have any patience.” Cristian chuckles as we share a look, knowing mayhem will follow in the wake of our disappearance.

“None of our families have any patience. It’s more a question of which one will get here first at this point.”

“A bet, perhaps?”

I cock my head at Cristian’s idea. That does sound enticing while we wait for our men to find us. “I believe I’ll take you up on that. What are the terms?”

“If my family gets here first, I want an introduction to The Company.”

“That sounds fair. Keegan can get you in touch with the Head of the assassin organization. Hell, I’ll even pay for your first request. And if my family is first, I want a favor from Hollis.”

“Hmm. Agreed. I think?—”

“Shut up! It doesn’t matter who will get here first! I’ll kill them all. And we will finally be crime free!”

Shrugging, I force myself to hold back a smirk as the voice gives us some of the information we need. Yes, there’s audio and not just video in the room.

“Are chairs too much to ask for?”

I tip my head back at Cristian’s dry response. The man on the other side must not find it humorous as he doesn’t respond.

Hell, our host isn’t going to find much funny when he realizes all the mistakes he’s made. It takes a certain type of person to kidnap another. This man? He doesn’t have it—I can tell that just from our...accommodations.

I shift trying to get comfortable. It’s going to be entertaining as fuck for us. I have no fear our organizations will destroy everything in their path to rescue us. Until then? Well, let’s just say, I’m not opposed to fucking with the guy.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:04 am*

“D on’t you have better things to do than annoying me?” Hol snaps.

“Nope,” I reply calmly, leaning back in my chair until two of the legs lift from the floor. “Cristian isn’t back yet, and Roman is working with Benji and Dante—I think he dragged Jude along, too. If anyone else needs to be micromanaged, they wouldn’t be working for me.”

“Lucky me, then,” he mutters.

I ignore him, knowing he’s not really bothered by my being here. If he was, he wouldn’t have a problem kicking me out.

In truth, this is the first reprieve I’ve had in a while. Between the Russian debacle Doc found himself in, everything that happened with Jude’s family and the De Luca’s, and the day-to-day things that come with keeping the Family in line, a few hours of peace sitting with my tesoro is a rare thing.

As the thought crosses my mind, my phone rings. The chair legs fall back to the floor with a loud bang as I sit upright, causing Hollis to give me a look . “Sorry,” I say absently, pulling out the phone and staring at the display.

Immediately, everything in me is on guard, and I go from calm lover to alert Second in an instant. I stand quickly, answering with a clipped, “What happened?”

“Sir...” The voice on the other end of the line shakes. “We... There’s been a situation.”

Striding to the door of the office, I grip the phone tightly, hearing the device crack. “What type of situation?” My words are low and commanding, the thread of control I have is there, but barely, as my patience wears thin.

“T—the Boss...is gone, sir.”

I don’t know where my phone ends up as I toss it as hard as I can into the hallway. “I need a ping on Cristian’s location, Hollis,” I snap over my shoulder.

I don’t wait for his affirmative before making my way down to Cristian’s office, hoping that his bastard husband is there because I don’t have the time or inclination to look for him. Slamming the office door open, I ignore Carter’s pointed glare.

“I’m initiating a lockdown,” I tell him, speaking before he does. “I’ll be sending Roman to you, and neither of you are to go anywhere without my say so. Understand?”

He jumps up from behind the desk. “What happened?”

The thin veneer of my humanity is fraying as the guard’s words run through my head over and over. “I’m not asking. This is an order as Cristian’s Second.”

Carter crosses the room as I turn to leave, grabbing my arm and earning himself a hand to his throat as I toss him against the wall beside the door.

“Where’s Cris?” he asks, trying to fight me off. “Dammit, Tennant, you can’t just make demands without talking to me.”

Before I can respond, Hollis rushes into the room. “I’ve sent people to Cristian’s last known location. I’ve called Leandro down to help monitor the situation, and alerted Benji that Roman is needed.”

Carter goes still, the fight leaving him as he begins to accept what he had to have known the moment I gave the first order...

“No,” he whispers, looking from me to Hollis. “I-it... No. What the fuck is happening, Ten? Where’s Cristian?”

“I don’t know,” I admit. “But I’m going to find out. You will wait here with Roman.”

“Like hell!”

Closing my hand around his throat, I dig my fingernails into the skin there. “You might be a mafia spouse, Carter, but when it comes to safety, my word is law. I should have already been on my way to the scene, but because of you, I’m behind on getting us all the answers we want.”

Carter’s gaze bores into mine, the navy blue almost black with his emotions. “You will bring him back to me, Tennant. He...he’s not...”

“No,” I say evenly. “He’s fine. A pain in my ass because he never fucking listens to me, but fine.” He has to be fine.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:04 am*

“There is absolutely no way I’ll let you choose the first dance song. Fuck, I’m not sure we’re even having dancing. What’s wrong with just having the ceremony and then telling everyone to get the fuck out?” I glare at my supposed best friend. “Why don’t you focus on your wedding instead of mine?”

Huffing, Benjamin rolls his eyes at me. “Because one, you’re getting married first. Two, it’s to the Head of the Martelli Family. And oh yeah, finally, I don’t trust you to do this right! If you don’t think I already have a scrapbook full of ideas for my wedding, you don’t know me well. But, right now, it’s focus on you time. Which...first dance? Let’s listen to some of these songs. I think we can find one that works, that isn’t common.”

Groaning, I bury my head in my hands. I’d love to kick him out of my office, but he knows I would never do that. Which is why he fucking ambushed me in it. At least he brought me coffee. Still, is it too much to ask for someone needing to be tortured? Other than me by listening to these sappy as fuck songs...

I’m almost overjoyed when there’s a knock at the door. Flashing what I hope is an apologetic look at Benjamin—from his facial expression, it did not work—I stand up to see who needs me. Opening the door, I’m stunned to see Marcus standing on the other side, covered in blood.

“What’s going on?” I ask slowly. “Do I need to call for a medical team?”

Marcus blinks repeatedly before staring down at himself, as if he doesn’t realize he’s covered in blood. “Shit. Fuck, I forgot. It’s not my blood. But it’s worse.”



It's only because I value Marcus, and that he's another one of Master's Boys, that keeps me from stabbing him. Well, that and the fact I'm technically not allowed to be armed in the house anymore. "What do you mean it's worse?"

Taking a deep breath, Marcus eyes me carefully before stepping back slightly. "Il Padrone is missing. I received a call from one of our soldiers, who glimpsed Il Padrone's bodyguards being taken out and Il Padrone thrown into a car—no license plate. I immediately went there, and once I ascertained it was true, I headed here. The uh... blood is from one of the guards who was still alive at the time. He didn't make it."

"You didn't think to call me?" I don't hesitate to close the distance and punch him. I'm about to hit him again when Benjamin tackles me from behind and pulls me back. I'm stronger, but I don't want to hurt him, so I let him take control—for now.

"I was five minutes away. That's why I was called. There was nothing you could've done. I wanted to personally tell you what happened instead."

I yank myself out of Benjamin's arms, growling as there's no other fucking outlet for this anger. I don't agree with Marcus's approach, but I can't disagree that this is news best told in person. But, fuck! Breathing deeply, I focus on what needs to be done.

"Alright, I want all of the soldiers looking for him. Immediately. That's your job at the moment, Marcus. Benjamin, get all the Boys here. No excuses. And for fuck's sake, I need all of the video footage from the surrounding area. Because we're going to get our Master home, and I will burn the fucking world down in the meantime."

"Yes, Boss," Marcus snaps out as he turns to leave. I know he'll rejoin us when the rest of the Boys get here, but I can't help stumbling at his words.

"What the fuck? Why did he call me Boss?" I whisper to Benjamin, who is taking

this all in silently.

Swallowing, Benjamin eyes me like I'm a wild animal—fair point right now. “You're Allesandro's Second. You know how it goes in this Family. When he's unavailable, you're in charge.”

I make it back to my desk on shaky legs, dropping into my chair as I try to adjust to that news. I cradle my head in my hands, trying to block out Benjamin and every fucking thing. “I can't do that. There's no way.”

“You were picked as his Second for a reason. Or are you telling me that Luca should still be here?”

Snapping my head up, I glare at my friend, who merely raises his eyebrow at me. Muttering a few curse words, I can't ignore his accusation.

Sighing, I stand and gesture for him to follow. Leaving my office, I head towards Master's instead. Entering without him feels wrong, like an invasion of his trust.

Grinding my teeth, I sit in his chair, the Martelli Family Crest proudly displayed behind me. Benjamin's nod of approval helps loosen the tension in my shoulders slightly. Still, my hand shakes as I reach for the phone.

“What are you doing?” Benjamin asks before I can grab it, and part of me is relieved.

“I need to make two calls. One to Luca. If, for some reason, Master's cousin found out Luca is a plant, it would let us know who is behind this. And if that isn't the case...I need to call the Amatos.”

Before I go any further, I make sure it's recording as I put it on speaker. It only rings a few times before it's picked up.

“Hello?”

“Luca. Is there anything you want to tell me?”

“Lio? What the fuck?! Why are you calling me right now? You know you’re supposed to wait.”

“Yeah, well, I’d do that if Master wasn’t missing. I’m wondering if that means you fucked up and Sergio put a hit out on him.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? Of course not. But what do you mean Il Padrone’s missing? For how long? What’s being done to track him?”

“It’s recent. And we’re working on everything. Which is why I’m checking on you first. Since I have more duties to get through, we’re done.”

“Wait! I’ll be in as soon as I can get a flight.”

“Don’t bother. You know Master would want you to keep in place. I’ve got this.”

“Fuck you. You haven’t been Second for long. You need me. I’m working for his cousin anyway, so I’m sure he’d understand if I need to come back.”

“Don’t you dare tell him Master’s missing. You know better! We will not look weak.”

“Of course I’m not going to tell him. I’ll think of something. I’ll send you a message for when to pick me up.”

The line goes dead and my jaw drops in disbelief. What. The. Fuck?

Exchanging incredulous glances with Benjamin, I tap out a message to Antonio. I want it confirmed where Luca is and when he comes in. There's too much that I don't know. I need to make sure that Luca isn't actually lying. And I hope to fuck he comes up with a good enough excuse to leave Sergio, considering he's supposed to be "learning" under him, even if it is a ruse.

"Well, that was lovely. Let's hope the next call goes better."

"Why are you calling them? We have a truce." Benjamin leans back, getting more comfortable in the chair I usually sit in. It's the traditional Second's chair, and it feels so fucking weird to be on this side and see him there.

"I need to know if there's been any odd movements going on. Whoever took Il Padrone wouldn't stay in our territory."

"Do you really expect them to know? I mean, it would fuck the truce completely."

"They may not know of a plan to take Il Padrone, but it doesn't mean they haven't noticed anything unusual."

"And if they have?" Benjamin leans forward, bracing himself. "You're not going to do anything stupid, are you?"

"What? Like burn their lives down? Would I do that?"

"To get your fiancé back? Yes."

"I'm glad you know me so well. Now, which one of them should I call? Since I'm acting Head, do I call Cristian, or do I act as a Second still and call Tennant?"

"Shit. Uh, how about a third option, in case you come off sounding a

little...accusatory?"

"Well, throw out a fucking name. God knows they've got plenty of them over there."

Tsking, Benjamin shakes his head. "I won't tell you to calm down, but you need to get yourself under control. And for fuck's sake, we're both large Families. Let's not insult someone we have a truce with."

"Shit. Fine. You're right. So, who do you suggest?" I slump down, wanting this to be over already. My skin itches to do something—anything. To let this tension have an outlet. And that's not fucking politics.

"To point out the obvious, call Roman. Not only is he Cristian's heir, but you're both, to my immense sadness, friends. Which, really, you can do better. After all, you have me."

I manage a watery chuckle at that, knowing Benjamin is just fucking around to lighten things up. Meeting his gaze, he gives me a nod of encouragement and I reach for the phone again, dialing the number from memory, as I make sure the recorder is on once again...

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:04 am*

“Y ou sure Hollis didn’t say anything about why we needed to come home?”

Benji sighs, long and exasperated. “If you ask one more time, I’m going to make you walk home.”

“You won’t, because then you’ll have to walk with me,” I say with a smirk.

Jude nudges my foot with his, drawing my attention to him. “Stop harassing him, Tesoro Mio; he’s just doing his job.”

Sighing, I sit back and cross my arms, knowing my lover is right, but the whole situation is just...odd. There was an urgency after Benji took Hollis’s call, but without more information, it’s hard to know what we’re walking in to.

I don’t like being in the dark like this, not when there’s an unexplainable thrum to the air. After all the shit that’s happened in the past, my nerves are shot, and the need to have things laid out in front of me, so I can prepare for whatever’s to come, makes me antsy.

Jude must sense this as he changes seats when the car stops for a light, pulling me close to him and pressing a kiss to my hair. “You’re going to give yourself an ulcer,” he says quietly.

“I’m fine,” I reply, just loud enough to be heard.

He snorts but lets me get away with it, for now.

Jude holds me the rest of the way to the main house, and though his touch is comforting, it only does so much to calm the sense of doom in me as I prepare for whatever news my father and Tennant are about to dish out.

Inside the house, the silence is deafening and the tension in the air is thick. In the middle of the day, it shouldn't be like this, not with the amount of staff employed to keep the main house running.

The house guards are on high alert, and worry forms in the pit of my stomach. Jude reaches for my hand, but I brush him off, giving an apologetic look that he waves off as he begins to straighten out his clothes.

Taking his cue, I tug at my sleeves and smooth my hands down my shirt—my suit jacket met an unfortunate end during our training today—and lead the way to my father's office. After a courtesy knock on the door, I walk in with Jude on my heels.

If I thought the tension in the house was thick, it's nothing compared to the stifling aura of the office. Carter is leaning against the front of the desk, with his arms crossed over his chest and his face downturned to the floor. Given how hush hush everything has been since Hollis's phone call, I expected it to be all hands on deck for this meeting, but even my father is absent from the room, and that, more than anything, makes my suspicions grow.

"What the hell is going on?"

Carter looks up, and the grief in his dark blue eyes is staggering. "I'm sorry, Figlio Mio...but your dad?—"

"No," I interrupt. "Whatever the fuck you're about to say, just no. It's not true."

Carter shakes his head and pushes off the desk, taking a step forward, but I counter

and take one back. He stops and stares at me with eyes full of emotions that I don't want to see or believe.

"He's gone, Roman. Someone took him." His voice wavers for a second before the pain and grief in his features changes, hardens, and the promise of retribution bleeds into his navy eyes. "Someone is playing games, trying to take what is ours. Trying to weaken us by taking him, but they don't know who they're messing with."

"No," I whisper, not wanting to believe a single word.

"Tennant is out there now, surveying the scene, and Hollis and Leandro are already at work. But Roman..."

"No!" I shout. "I... He can't... I can't..."

Jude tries to wrap an arm around me but I move away. My emotions are too volatile right now for touch, no matter how badly I want to fall apart.

Carter moves to stand in front of me, and I look up at my second father, seeing the pain, anger, and regret of what he's about to ask of me shining in his gaze. "You're his heir, Roman."

I shake my head. "I'm not ready."

"You don't get a choice this time, Figlio Mio. I'm so sorry, but the Family needs you. Cristian needs you."

The walls of the office are starting to close in as the pieces of my life fall apart around me. It wasn't supposed to be like this.

Looking away from Carter, I meet Jude's pale green gaze, and with just one look, he



seems to understand, because he moves in close, pulling me tight against him. I don't fight him this time, needing him to hold me up as my denial starts to turn to anger.

"What the fuck happened?" I ask.

Carter shakes his head. "I don't know. As I said, Tennant is at the scene now, getting a lay of the land. Hopefully he returns with answers. I?—"

My phone ringing interrupts whatever he was about to say. Pulling the device from the pocket of my pants, I check the display. A whoosh of air escapes my lungs as tension has me straightening my spine, but I don't leave the comfort of Jude's embrace.

Looking up from the display to my lover and father, I say, "It's Emilio."

They both stiffen.

"Answer it," Carter orders.

I'm not sure I want to, but I accept the call anyway...

"Hey, Lio." I try to inject as much cheer into my voice as possible. Especially since talking to him is normally fun, and leaves me smiling for days. The last thing we need right now is for anyone, even our allies, to know we're at our weakest. "Now's not the best time..."

"This will be quick. I need to ask you something, and it's important."

There's an edge to my friend's voice that's not usually there, not even when he's grumbling about how inane wedding planning is. There's a pit in my stomach because the seriousness in Lio's voice raises my hackles.

Quickly, I activate the recording program that Hollis installed on my phone. I never thought I'd need it, because Lio and I try to keep our conversations away from business, but given the way this day is going, something tells me this is important to document. "Sure, what's up?"

"Have you, or more specifically, has Hollis, heard anything about attacks on a Family or other organization?"

My heart leaps into my throat, and frantically, I put the call on speaker, almost dropping the phone as my hands begin to shake. I'm barely able to steady my fingers enough to one handedly sign, "Get Hollis in here."

Jude pulls out his phone to do as ordered, while I turn my focus back to the conversation at hand.

"Hol would be the best one to ask, since he's kept a bead on all that. I know there's been a smattering of chatter here and there, but nothing concrete enough to act on. Our name has been thrown around a lot, but that's to be expected with what we've started pushing.

"The Martelli name has also been mentioned, but as I said, Hollis is the most informed on all this. I can give you his number, or go get him, if you want. Is everything okay?"

There's a long moment of silence and I look between Carter and Jude, anxious for my other lover to get here and assure me that what Lio's implying isn't true...

Because if it is... If what I think happened happened... It won't be good for any of us.

The pause in conversation doesn't scare me—I'm sure they're trying to parse out the

truth in my words, wondering how much they should trust me. I would be doing the same in their position.

“Why don’t you go get him. I think we need to have a more in-depth talk.” Lio’s statement ends on a frustrated sigh that has the hairs on my arms standing up.

“That doesn’t sound good, but sure, give me a moment, I have to cancel an appointment,” I lie. I mute the phone and look at Carter. “What do you think?” I ask.

“It seems,” he says slowly, “That we’re not the only ones being targeted.”

“Could be a ruse,” Jude points out.

“True,” Carter muses.

I wish Tennant were here. He’s so much better at this type of shit than I am. Luckily, Hollis walks through the door and some of my tension eases.

“What’s going on?” he asks, heading straight for me.

“Shit. Lio’s on the phone, asking about the most recent chatter concerning attacks on mafia organizations. He hasn’t explicitly said, but we think something happened over there, too. Either that or they’re the ones who have Dad and are trying to save face with us now.”

Hollis considers my words and nods once, squeezing my shoulder. “We’ll get to the bottom of it, Amore.” He releases me and heads to the corner where he has a computer set up. It only takes a few moments before he says, “Okay, I’m ready, let’s see what he has to say.”

Letting out a stuttering breath, I move closer to Hollis’s set up and unmute the phone.

“Lio? Sorry about that. I have Hollis here now, so he can answer your questions.”

“Emilio, not how I expected to speak with you again,” Hollis says. “But I hear you want to know about the chatter regarding your Family?”

There’s a moment of hesitation and, at first, I think he’s going to hedge his words again, before he says, “Yeah. We need to know anything, and I mean anything, that’s been said or even hinted at.”

Hollis doesn’t miss a beat, though the dark look crossing his face says his thoughts are in line with ours. “Not much, I’m afraid. You know I’ve kept an ear out, and I’ve discreetly had people looking into it as well. There’s always someone grumbling and wishing they could do something about organizations like ours, but... for the past few months, there’s been one voice that’s slightly louder than the others. I can’t tell you who they are though, they’re annoyingly more advanced and discreet than most of the others. I’ve been watching, as I do with all potential threats. Whether this one is viable, or not, remains to be seen.” Hollis pauses the conversation for a moment, his fingers flying over his keyboard. “Any particular reason you’re asking? If there’s a concern or problem the Martellis are having, I’m happy to look into it for you.”

“Send the information to our people,” Lio says. “So they can make their own assessment.”

Hollis laughs, low and borderline cruel. “I don’t mean to be insulting to a friend and ally, but I’m better than them. There’s a reason you’re calling and not having your people do the dirty work for you. While they might service you well on a day-to-day basis, you need someone more sophisticated for this job.”

Biting my lip, I have to look away from Hollis so I don’t laugh. Across the room, I see Carter translating for Jude, while also shaking his head at my lover’s bluntness.

“If you haven’t pinned this possible threat down yet, then maybe you’re not as good as you think,” Lio responds.

I snap my gaze back over to Hollis, to find him leaning back in his chair, a small Tennant-like smile on his face. “I’ve tracked down every single person who’s ever tried to hide from us—even if it took some time. If you want to leave your Family’s fate in the hands of the lessers that you have on payroll, feel free, but know that the next time you call, I’m charging for a consult.” He reaches out for the phone to hang up.

“No, wait!” Lio says, a little more life in his tone this time as panic begins to bleed through.

“I’m listening, but my patience has run thin,” Hollis says icily. “Ally or not, friend of Roman or not, I won’t tolerate such blatant disrespect.”

“I trust Roman, and at the moment, our circle of trust is smaller than normal. That’s the only reason I’m telling you this.”

“What’s wrong, Lio?” I ask, my heart in my throat at the graveness in his voice.

He lets out a heavy breath. “Someone took Il Padrone.”

You could hear a pin drop in the office, it’s so quiet as we absorb his words. Finally, Carter comes closer so he can be heard more easily over the phone. “I suggest you gather that circle of trust, Emilio. It seems we have a lot to discuss, since they got Cristian, too.”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:04 am*

Benjamin and I exchange shocked looks. I'm not even sure what to say, although Benjamin gesturing rapidly at the phone reminds me I need to respond. Straightening, as if they could see me, I clear my throat.

"Someone is very foolish to take on us both, and it will be to their detriment." Shifting into the role I'm expected to take, I shove down the need for immediate violence and ask, "Will the Amato Family host us this evening to discuss strategy?"

The silence on the other end of the line lets me know that even Roman is having a difficult time adjusting to being the Head of the Family. "We will. However, you are limited to only four additional members."

I quickly run through my list. Benjamin, as my Second; Marcus, as he was there for the initial truce; Ignacio, because he'll be the best if they are trying to double cross us. And...sadly, if Luca is here, he may as well be useful. "Very well. I agree to your terms. Seven o'clock?"

"Make that eight."

I almost snort at the byplay. If he wants to assert himself this way, I don't give a fuck. My priority is getting Il Padrone back. "We will see you then. And Hollis—I look forward to what you find."

I hang up immediately, ignoring Benjamin's glare. I mean, they wanted to fuck with me, so I don't see the big deal. Benjamin, however, seems to have a different opinion.

"Is there a reason you wanted to antagonize our allies?" Benjamin's unimpressed

stare does nothing for me.

“Roman wanted to play around. I merely reminded him I have a bigger dick. From the little I’ve been able to glean from Roman and the others, Hollis is the one to be afraid of, so I went right to the source to show I’m not afraid of them. They can either get with the fucking program, or we’ll do it our damn selves and they can fuck off.”

“I...don’t even know where to start with that. I’m going to ignore most of it, and instead, go with... are you fucking crazy? As your Second—and most importantly, your best friend—I’d rather not see you killed, or at minimum, stabbed. Because even if you’re right that Hollis is the scary one, he still comes with Tennant. And uh, I’d just be a tad bit cautious there.”

“This isn’t a life you can live in fear. Sure, I made a calculated risk, and maybe it’ll pay off, maybe it won’t, but I can’t hide. Not if I’m supposed to be the Head of this Family—as you reminded me. You need to get more accustomed to violence. In fact—” The knock on the door stops our conversation abruptly. Changing my pitch, I call out, “Enter.”

All of the Boys shuffle in, with various different expressions on their faces. Marcus still appears shocked as he sits next to Benjamin. The way Keegan stands behind his lover is both protective and challenging. Only I’m not sure if it’s challenging to me or the way Master has been taken. I’ll keep an eye on that situation.

Ignacio goes right to Benjamin, placing his hand on his lover’s shoulder. His teeth are clenched together, and the fierce look would intimidate most. Finally, Antonio takes up a spot at the wall, blending in, just like the Ghost he’s meant to be. He radiates pain, and I refuse to let him separate himself from the family. Not now. Not when we need everyone.

“Antonio, come closer. We all need to be on the same page here.” Stiffening his

shoulders, he takes careful, measured steps toward the desk, stopping next to Ignacio. Nodding, I continue speaking, “Alright. We know that our Master was taken this morning, while stopping for wedding invitations. This is not a normal stop for him at all. That means we should look at anyone having inside knowledge.”

“—Fuck. Not another damn mole,” Ignacio hisses, side eyeing Marcus.

Clearing my throat, I redirect them. “I think this one is far easier to figure out. The only person who would have asked him to make such a stop would have been one of the wedding organizers. It was a dumb fucking move. Ignacio, I want you to get her and bring her to the special room we have for such guests. Marcus, where are we on videos?”

“I believe I’ve managed to get them all, but I haven’t had a chance to go through them. That was my next step.”

“Don’t bother. Send them over to Hollis at the Amato Family. He made it clear that he believes he’s better than us, so let’s give him the data to deal with.”

“Wait. Why the fuck are we bringing in a rival organization? Sure, we have a damn truce with them, but we trust them enough to admit we’re without Il Padrone?” Ignacio slams his hand down on Benjamin's shoulder, making him wince.

“Ignacio, back the fuck up. Now. You will respect me, and you will sure the fuck respect my Second. I don’t care what you do in your private life, when you’re here, he outranks you.”

Ignacio stiffens, gritting his teeth before bowing his head, “Sorry, Boss.”

I wave it away, not interested in starting a pissing contest with my own family. “To answer your question, Cristian was also kidnapped. It appears there’s been a



coordinated attack on us both. Roman and I have agreed to meet tonight to discuss working together. He's limited it to me and four others. Benjamin will attend. As for the other three, I'd like Marcus, Ignacio, and...there's a chance Luca will be here."

Their shock over Cristian quickly changes to grumbles of complaint. Luca doesn't have many friends here anymore. Fuck, I don't even want him near this shit show, but unfortunately, he does have insight as Master's former Second that could be valuable.

Keegan cocks his head and asks, "I thought he was with Allesandro's cousin? Isn't he supposed to be trying to take over his own territory?"

Frowning, I tap my fingers on Master's desk before cringing, hating the feel of being on this side. "He's supposed to be. That's the other thing I want checked. Antonio—I need you to be my Ghost. Can you confirm that he was actually where he was supposed to be when this happened? And that he flew in on this flight? You can use the excuse of picking him up, but I need to know he's being honest."

"Something seem off, Boss?" Marcus asks, biting his bottom lip.

"Not necessarily. But aside from the people in this room, nothing gets taken for granted. Nothing goes outside us when it comes to any secrets. Not unless it comes from me or Benjamin. He's authorized to speak for me. Let's get this done. Those I mentioned, we need to be ready to go at seven pm."

Benjamin pales, but I ignore it. This is trial by fire, and unfortunately, I don't have time for him to catch up. Hell, I don't have time to catch up. In almost perfect stereo, they respond in the affirmative. I dismiss them, knowing that those without a specific task will work their contacts, they're well trained and don't need hand holding—thank fuck. We need to find Il Padrone. Now .

First though? It's time I had a little chat with a certain wedding planner. It appears

that for all of the lists she had, she forgot a shit list, because she just ended up on ours. And fuck if she'll survive it.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:04 am*

Hollis glares at my phone like it personally offended him, before pushing away from the workspace. “I’ll be in my office until they get here. Emilio wants to throw down a challenge, I’m happy to oblige.”

“It’s a stressful situation for us all, Hol. Don’t piss them off before we figure out a plan.”

He gives me a bland smile. “No promises. I’ll see what I can do to find the information they’re asking for. If nothing else, Leandro will at least have something from the CCTV he’s been combing through. Hopefully, Ten also finds something useful at the scene. I’ll let you know if we find anything before then.” Gripping my chin, he lifts my face to his. “It’ll be okay, Amore,” he whispers, before pressing his lips to mine.

I wish I could believe that. Everything in me is screaming, and all I want is to curl up with my lovers and have them take the pain away, but I can’t. So, I cling to Hollis for a moment longer before letting him go, knowing he’s one of the best chances we have to figuring out what the fuck is going on.

Hollis leaves and I move to lean against Dad’s desk, unwilling to sit in his seat. Curling my fingers around the edge of the desk, I hang on and try to get my rioting emotions under control. What my Family needs right now is a Boss, not the scared child I am.

“What do you need, Roman?” Carter asks.

My dad back. I can’t say that aloud, though. The sentiment is true for all of us, and

saying it will show a weakness I can't afford—not now, even in front of my family.

“Jude.” I meet my lover's eyes, swallowing past the lump in my throat. “This isn't how I wanted to do this. I wanted more time to come up with a way to say it, but... I need you to be my Second.”

He immediately shakes his head. “I'm not qualified for that.”

My grip on the edge of the desk tightens, my fingers aching, but the pain grounds me. “You're the only one who is. Hollis would refuse if I asked him. His job is better served behind the screen, and Leandro is a secret we still need to keep, until he decides what to do about his birthright. Which means not parading him in front of people who don't know he exists.”

“Tennant—”

“Is my father's Second,” I interrupt. “And he's damned good at his job, but he's not what I need.” There's a desperation in my tone that I can't quite control. “Tennant molded himself into being whatever my father needed him to be, and it worked for them, but the same can't be said for Ten and me. I love him, but as was proven when I let you live, our views are too different. We can't afford to be at each other's throats right now.”

Jude turns to Carter. “Surely you'll be willing to step up.”

Carter studies me for a long moment before replying. “I'll support Roman as best as I can. He's my son, and I will never let him falter, but...this isn't what he needs from me. My place has always been by Cristian's side. Even when I was on Roman's guard, Cris was always my endgame.”

I give my father a weak smile. “Thank you. What I need from you is to keep the men

in line, help Joel and Enzo navigate the scheduling and chaos. Tennant...” Blowing out a breath, I turn my attention back to Jude. “Another reason I can’t ask Ten is because without Dad, he’ll unravel. He cares about us, but Dad is his world. I have no doubt that he’ll help you step into your role, but we can’t rely on him to be impartial.”

Releasing my death grip on the desk, I cross the space between us and grip Jude’s hands in mine, looking up into pale green eyes that are full of trepidation. “I need you, Jude.”

“I’m a liability,” he replies. Letting go of one hand, he gestures to his ears. “I’m a weakness your enemies can exploit, Roman.”

“You’re stronger than you give yourself credit for. Not only that, but are you really telling me you’ll let someone bully you simply because you can’t hear?”

There’s a slight tightening around his eyes, but other than that, there’s no outward sign that my words hit their mark. “Your truce with the Martellis came before my time,” he says slowly. “Is now the best time to not only introduce me, but put me in such a position?”

“What are you protesting here?” I ask. “The role, or your capabilities?”

His hand in mine tightens and he narrows his eyes. “I want you to make the best choice, Roman. I’ll support you, but in order to do that, I need to make sure you’ve thought this through.”

“I have,” I insist. “I’m not asking as your lover, Jude, but as your Boss.”

He nods once. “Okay. I still think my deafness will be a disadvantage, but I’ll accept my place as your Second.”

“Thank you.” Raising up onto my toes, I press a quick kiss to his lips. Pulling back, I tell him, “We’ll figure it all out at a later date. As my Second, you’ll need your own interpreter, but for today, we’ll make it work.” I look at Carter. “Do you know if Dmitri is on shift? He can fill in until we figure something else out.”

“He’s not, but Soren is. Though I’d advise you to not bring him in unless it’s really necessary.”

“It is. Jude needs an interpreter, and I’d like to see them try to argue about an extra body. Knowing if they’re ableist pricks off the bat will seal the deal on if we let them in on our investigations or not. I would rather not cut them off, as they have skills we could use, but I won’t tolerate that kind of disrespect.”

Plus, I’ve always been shit at sim-com. Languages have never come as easily to me as they do Dad. My ASL is better than my SEE, but my brain doesn’t translate between English and Sign well enough to use them simultaneously. And Jude deserves better than that.

He’s carved out a place in our Family. Asking him to step up even further, to embed himself deeper into our world, is huge, so the least I can do is make it easier by allowing him access to his own language.

I understand Carter’s hesitation, though. Bringing Soren in means allowing Doc as well. He already knows, of course, as it’s his job to deal with Dad’s injured guards, but we’d all rather keep him as far away from the Martellis as possible for now. Things are stressful enough, we don’t need his special brand of fuckery, especially with how close he is to Dad.

This is a fucking nightmare.

Before anything else can be said, Tennant walks into the office. The look on his face

is grim, and my heart plummets into my stomach. The last thing we need right now is more bad news.

“Before I give my report,” he says, sweeping his eyes around the room, “We should call in Hollis.”

“I need him focused on other tasks right now; we have a meeting with the Martelli Family in a few hours.”

His already ice blue eyes grow colder. “Why? What do they have to do with any of this? Unless we’re talking about a negotiation? In which case, I need time to prep a torture room.”

“No.” I move away from Jude to stand directly in front of Tennant. “I need you to rein in whatever’s going through your head right now. This is bigger than just us, Ten. They got Il Padrone as well. Which means whoever is behind all of this has a plan in place, and we need one, too.”

“I don’t agree to inviting them here, not when we’re in lockdown.”

“Well, we won’t exactly all fit in the basement office,” I snap back. “And I know you would have disagreed with meeting on their turf, which wasn’t my preference either. Plus, Hollis needs his setup on hand. Lio asked a question, and Hollis is searching for answers.” I hope I can convey everything I want to in my gaze as Tennant stares me down. “I need you, Ten,” I say lowly. “As my partner, as Dad’s best friend, as the Amato Second in Command.”

If possible, I think his expression gets harder. The almost indecipherable turning down of his mouth, and the way his icy eyes seem to glow with restrained violence is noticeable only because I know his expressions so well. But this Tennant is a stranger. There’s an air of danger surrounding him that I’m almost inclined to listen

to.

I've seen Ten act in his capacity as Second many times over the years. I've seen what he does to people he uses in his experiments, and how brutally efficient he is at extracting the responses he wants from those who betray us. None of those times have even come close to making him lose the tight control he has. Something in his eyes though tells me that this won't be like all the other times.

That whatever hold Tennant has on the bloodlust running through him, it's about to break, and getting him on board with any plan needs to happen now.

"Fine," he bites out. "There's not much to say, anyway. The scene was clean, definitely an expert job. Cristian's guards are dead." I gasp, the pain of losing Gabriele rushing through me. "Doc tried his best once on scene, but..." He shakes his head. "Whoever's behind this wasn't taking any chances by leaving witnesses. Hopefully, Hollis can get something useful from the cameras in the area. I have men out there surveying a larger canvas area, but I don't have faith that they'll find anything."

"We'll make do. Maybe the Martellis were able to get something useful from their scene." I go for sounding hopeful, as it's the only way I can get through this.

"Possibly," Tennant replies, though he doesn't sound convinced.

"Go check in with Hollis," I tell him. "Then do whatever you have to do to make sure we're secure. I don't want to stretch our resources too far this early on, but have Enzo check in with the De Lucas."

"You should probably have Georgio brought in," Carter says with a sigh. "He's always suspect number one. Though, this time, I'm willing to believe he has nothing to do with it without even talking to him, since they went after Allesandro as well."



Still, maybe he's heard something he hasn't deemed necessary to tell us."

"I'll have Enzo do that as well," Tennant tells him. "You want to talk to him?"

"Yeah. It's best coming from me."

I let out a breath, glad that Carter at least is still thinking straight. Though he's dealt with his father's bullshit for so long, it's second nature to him now to suspect him first.

"Jude is my Second," I tell Tennant. "He'll need your support."

Tennant flicks his gaze to our lover, before looking back to me. "It's about time you made that choice, Little Prince. It's a good one. I'll do my best to mentor him."

"Thank you." I didn't have any doubts, but having Tennant's approval goes a long way to easing some of my tension.

He nods once and flicks his fingers at Jude. "Come along, we have things to do." He doesn't give anyone time to respond before turning on his heel and walking out, presumably to go update Hollis.

Jude goes to follow and I stop him with a hand. "I'll send Soren to you so he can interpret. I'll ask the trips if they know anyone who can handle our world and won't have a problem working for you."

"That'll be appreciated. I won't let you down, Tesoro Mio."

"I know, now go. He doesn't have much patience when he's training someone."

Jude smirks but says nothing as he follows Tennant out of the room.

When it's just me and Carter, I let out a long breath that ends on a sob. Carter crosses the space between us and wraps his arms tightly around me. He holds me close, letting me cling to him as I let out all of the emotions I've been holding back since hearing the news.

"Shh," he whispers into my hair. "It'll be okay, Figlio Mio. We'll find him, and whoever took him will pay the price."

I allow myself a few more moments to cry before pulling away. Carter pulls a handkerchief out of his pocket and wipes my face. Taking a few deep breaths to get my shit together, I meet Carter's gaze. "We'll make them pay," I repeat.

He nods and gives me a grim smile. "We will."

It's a promise and a plan, all in one.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:05 am*

S hoving the woman into the torture room gives me a vicious glee. Especially knowing that Lio is on his way. While I enjoy torture, Lio has not only learned from the best, but often takes it one step further. It's only the addition of my Little Mouse that worries me.

I know Lio chose him to be his Second, but fuck, everything in me screams to keep Benjamin safe. And I know if I don't get over this attitude, not only will my Little Mouse have something to say, so will Lio, and I do not want to piss him off. Especially right now. Not with Il Padrone missing.

Lio is volatile on a good day. Losing his husband-to-be? Yeah, I'm waiting for the fuckery to truly begin. I'd almost pity the woman I'm locking up, because I know she's going to be the first casualty to his insanity. But fuck that. Not when she is responsible for this whole fucking situation.

Storming into the room, Lio barely glances at me. He must have been on the move right as I texted him. Benjamin enters behind him, a silent presence. There's a strength rolling off him that I had never thought possible, but it's there. Now it's just a question of if he can truly keep up with Lio's brand of crazy.

Nodding to me, he doesn't say a word as I back up. The woman is tied to the chair in the center of the room. There's not an inch of give, and when I circle around her, I have a front row ticket to watching her eyes widen when Lio doesn't stop moving.

There's no monologue or anything. He just punches her, blood splattering on her pastel suit as her head snaps back.

Coughing, she shouts as Lio grabs a knife from the table I had waiting. “Wait! Don’t you want to talk?”

“Why the fuck would I talk when I know you helped steal my Master? You think we’re idiots here? And I sure as hell know you’re the guilty one if Ignacio picked you up. He doesn’t make mistakes. Unlike you.” Lio uses the knife to expertly slice the right arm of her suit off. “After all, we can learn everything we need to know from your electronics, you fucking cunt.”

“But no! He told me I wouldn’t get caught!” she screeches, as Lio begins to dig the knife into her skin. It may not be a deep cut, but the blood trickles down, she pulls at the restraints.

I snort at her assertion, and even Benjamin rolls his eyes. Lio doesn’t bat an eye. Instead, he crouches down and cups her jaw, almost tenderly. It’s so at odds with the violence he’s meted out that she flinches. Lio doesn’t allow it and squeezes her jaw, tsking as she tries to move.

“Now,” he murmurs, “Exactly what are you talking about? I’m happy to skin you alive and get everything from your electronics, but if you do have information, I’m willing to listen. You’d better make the decision quickly.”

Letting go of her chin, Lio stands up, backing away slightly. Benjamin moves to his side, handing him the skinning tool. The woman blanches at the sight.

Me? I’m fucking impressed. It’s like watching a ballet between Lio and Benjamin. A blood-soaked one, but still, they move in unison. Damn, it has me so fucking hard. I press against my erection, even as the woman starts spilling her secrets. I can’t wait to pin my Little Mouse to the wall after this.

“I didn’t agree to be a wedding planner for you criminals . My boss did. When I was

approached to give a little information, I didn't think it was a big deal. And if money showed up in my account, well, it was a hell of a lot more than I was making dealing with clients.

"I never knew the guy. He contacted me via phone. I'm not even sure how he got my number. But he knew my brother had overdosed when we were younger. Told me he wanted to get rid of the men who caused it," she says with a sneer. The blood on her face from being punched didn't do her any favors in the looks department, and neither does that. "And it turned out to be your oh-so-precious Master. He asked if I wanted to help get rid of the problem permanently. He promised I wouldn't get caught, and yes, I was fucking proud to help! All he needed me to do was get Allesandro somewhere at a specific time, and he'd take care of the rest. And he did. Good luck getting him back alive. I hope he's dead!"

I shake my head in amazement. Fuck . How much of a death wish does this woman have? Admitting she knew what would happen...

Lio is almost vibrating with rage, and Benjamin goes to grab him, but his fingers merely skim Lio's clothing as he jumps forward, burying the knife into the woman's shoulder. It's not enough to kill her, but her screeching at least cuts off her vitriol toward our Family.

"Lio!" Benjamin's sharp cry pulls him back and he yanks the knife out, whirling around to face my Little Mouse.

For a moment, it's like everything stops. My own heart begins to race as I worry that Lio will shove the crimson-covered knife into my lover, that he's that far gone. The expression on Lio's face... I almost step back, but I don't want to call attention to myself. It's like facing down a fucking cobra, and yet my Little Mouse steps forward, touching Lio's shoulder.

“Boss, you need to calm down. Do you think we’ve gotten everything from her?” Lio shudders at Benjamin’s calm voice, the insanity bleeding from his face.

“Anything we don’t have, we’ll get from her electronics. I don’t think she knows anything worthwhile. She was brought in because of her past—nothing more than a piece of shit for this mystery man to use.”

“And we likely won’t find much. It sounds like this man is playing quite a game. Otherwise, Allesandro would have just been killed outright, and for sure, she would have been silenced. He had to know you’d find her.”

“Fuck.” Lio’s exhales harshly. “It’s a damn set up. And she can’t just go missing. Fuck. Alright.”

Twisting back around, he quickly slits the woman’s throat, not sparing a thought about it. Benjamin nods in approval. “Mugging?”

“Yeah. Rip her clothes a little more, scatter some shit around. The usual. And if the cops decide to sniff around too much, we’ll make a sacrifice.”

“I’ll look into who would be best to take the fall,” Benjamin says quietly. “Go clean up. I’ve got this.”

“No, I’ll take care of it. Why don’t you and your lover boy over there go enjoy yourselves. I need you both ready to go at seven, so don’t fucking wear each other out too much.” Lio’s smirk as he stares at me says he knows exactly what this has done to me. Then again, if there’s anyone who understands blood as an aphrodisiac, it would be him.

“Thanks, Boss,” I interject, striding forward and grabbing Benjamin by the wrist. I pull him away, even as he struggles. I know he wants to show he can be the best

Second, but fuck. I need him now.

Once we are out of the fun room, I push him against the wall, kissing him deeply and pressing my erection against him. Benjamin's struggle quickly gives out and I pick him up, tossing him over my shoulder. It takes too long to get to our apartment in the mansion, and by the time I toss him down onto the bed, I'm sweating from the exertion.

"You'd better not be too tired to fuck me." Benjamin shimmies out of his clothes, a snarl on his face that I never expected to see.

"Oh, hell no." I fumble around for the lube, finally grabbing it as Benjamin presses his heels against the bed, raising his ass up for me perfectly. I practically whimper at the sight of his hole.

"Don't hold back. I don't need much prep this time." The fact he's already planning on the next time? Shit. Maybe it's a good thing Lio told us to be careful with time. Despite his insistence that he won't need as much prep, I carefully insert one finger at a time, until he's pretty much riding three of them. Damn . The look... "If you don't want me to get off like this, you'd better get the fuck in me."

I remove my fingers and line up my cock to his ass, coating my length in lube before slowly pressing in, not giving him what he wants. He needs to remember he's not the one in charge. Outside of the bedroom? He may outrank me. However, right now, he's under me, and I'm the one fucking him.

I grab his neck, I restrict his air briefly before letting go. Leaning down, I whisper in his ear, "Who do you belong to?"

"Fuck! I belong to you!" he cries out as I drive hard into him, pegging his prostate as he goes crazy. He reaches for his cock, but I catch his hand, pinning it above him.

“You’ll come on my cock or not at all,” I snarl. “You’re fucking mine. And no matter what, you will always belong to me. You’re my Little Mouse.”

I thrust harder, my own orgasm barreling down on me, but I refuse to come until he does. I want to see him fly, to know he’s getting his pleasure from me—and only me.

Benjamin shakes, throwing his head back as he shouts out, cum spurting from his cock, covering his belly and chest. The sight of it is too much for me and I tip right over the edge, following him over into the abyss.

Shit, I think I even passed out from the intensity, because it takes me a moment to come back online fully. Blinking, I manage to shove myself off him, rolling onto the bed. Both us are breathing hard, and he pats his hand over the bed until he manages to catch my hand. Curling our fingers together, he finally gasps out, “I’ve always been yours.”

Smiling, I can’t help but exhale in pleasure—and relief. “Good. Now, let’s get a shower so we can take a nap. We don’t want to be late to the meeting.”

“Oh, fuck no. Not while I’m still trying to get used to this whole Second thing. It’s fucking scary as shit.”

Standing, I help him off the bed. I lightly nip his neck before cupping the side of his face. “You’re doing great already.”

He barks a laugh as he shakes his head. “I must be doing well enough if it sends you into a He-Man impression. And no, I’m definitely not complaining. It certainly gives me incentive to get even better.”

I press my lips together, unable to say a word as he sashays to the bathroom. Fuck . My Little Mouse is going to kill me one of these days. And what a fucking way to go.



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:05 am*

“If you’re planning on boring us to death,” I say conversationally, looking right up at the camera, “this is a good start.”

Allesandro snorts, but doesn’t say anything. After all, it’s not like he can disagree with me. Being left chained in a soulless concrete room is so cliché. Granted, Tennant’s torture chambers have the same look, but at least we give his experiments chairs, and something to look at—even if those things are the instruments of their pain.

When no response comes from our host, I consider thunking my head against the wall, just for something to do. Instead, I begin humming one of the Taylor Swift songs that Roman’s had on repeat the last few weeks.

“Really?” Allesandro raises an eyebrow at my song choice.

I shrug. “There’s a reason we always have music playing at the house. Silence is maddening. And it hasn’t even been a day yet. I don’t really plan on dying by boredom in here. Though, it might be worth it if I get to skip Ten’s lecture.”

“Save us from hovering Seconds,” he mutters.

“Exactly. I don’t know about you, but my Family will try to put me in a bubble after this—as if I can’t take care of myself. I’ve been doing it a lot longer than any of them.”

“I can already feel my Boys’ worry and protectiveness. It’d be...sweet, if it wasn’t so damn annoying. Who do they think made them and taught them how to live up to

their full potential?”

I hum my agreement. “I’m surprised our host hasn’t snapped at us yet,” I say lowly.

“Maybe he perished from boredom himself,” Allesandro responds.

Laughing, I lean my head against the concrete wall and sigh. As much as I’m enjoying talking to Il Padrone—something we don’t get to do much because of our respective job titles—I wish something interesting would happen. No, I don’t want to be tortured, but anything is better than this. Not that I have high hopes the torture would be any good. I grew up with Tennant, after all, so it takes a lot to impress me.

“We’ve already bet on who’s Family will get here first,” I say casually. “Shall we also wager against who is going to be the most...destructive in their search?”

“Easy, my Emilio. He is the most...hostile one when it comes to me.”

“Yes, I can see that. Though he’ll find a match in Tennant.” In truth, it worries me. The longer I’m gone, the less control Tennant will have over himself.

Saving him when we were teenagers was the right thing to do, but for the monster that lives in Tennant, it meant something more. Loyalty isn’t what keeps Tennant by my side. If it was, he never would have ended up hospitalized in the first place.

No, what keeps Ten with me is something far deeper than anyone else will ever understand. And it scares me shitless to know I’m not there to rein him in. I have to believe Hollis’s hold on him is enough...

“I’m willing to take that wager,” Allesandro says, ignorant to the dark turn my thoughts have taken.

“Name your price, Padrone.”

His smirk is a much-needed light in this otherwise bland cell.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:05 am*

My muscles are deliciously sore after Ignacio stamped his mark on me, but I manage to walk into the office without a problem. I'm not surprised that Lio is already waiting for us, even though we're earlier than anyone else. I immediately sit in the Second's chair, unsurprised that Ignacio sits next to me.

"Have fun?" Lio smirks at me, even though the amusement doesn't reach his eyes.

My heart hurts for him, but I know all I can do is be there for him. Because we will find his love. "Mmm, we did. But we're ready."

"I didn't expect anything less." Lio runs his fingers along the desk, taking a deep breath. "I'm not sure how to deal with Roman."

"What do you mean? You've talked to him a million times before. Unfortunately." I cringe, having never hidden my disdain for how close those two are now. It's not that I don't want to share my best friend, it's just that I don't want to share him with Roman—or anyone that might be too compatible with him. After all, I've trained him to be the best friend ever.

Rolling his eyes, Lio smirks at me, and this time there is true amusement on his face. "You know that as much as I enjoy Roman, he'd never replace you."

Looking down at my nails—which need a manicure—I mumble, "Of course. After all, friendship rules won't allow it."

"I hate to interrupt your...love fest here, but can you clarify?" Ignacio inserts himself into our conversation, earning a glare from us both. He immediately dips his head

toward Lio, suddenly remembering that Lio is the Head of the Family right now.

“It was different before. Roman and I weren’t Heads of the Family. We were just us . Now there’s all these expectations. Am I supposed to be suspicious of him? Of their Family? What’s the protocol? Can I still treat him as a friend?” Words tumble from Lio, and my heart goes out to him, because yeah, this is a fucking shitty situation.

“And this is why I should have been given the position,” a new voice cuts in, icy coldness dripping off each word.

I turn in my seat and watch Luca enter. Since Ignacio left the door open, the fucker must have heard Lio. I grip the arms of the chair I’m sitting in, so I don’t do something rash—for now. Antonio files in afterwards, giving a discreet nod to Lio. He must have been able to confirm that Luca did actually fly in just now, and isn’t behind this attack—or at least not overtly.

“Luca. I’m so pleased to see you,” Lio sneers, reminding everyone there’s no love lost between those two. “And you weren’t given the position for a damn good reason. You betrayed Master before. I haven’t. If you want to be helpful, then you can be here. If you want to start shit, I’m sure any of the Boys would gladly escort you to the airport. Whether you’d be in one piece afterward or not, I wouldn’t give a fuck.”

Luca presses his lips together and crosses his arms as he tries to stare down Lio. He looks like a toddler who hasn’t had a nap yet. “You need me. After all, I’m not the one who allowed Il Padrone to be kidnapped. That’s on you, as a Second.”

“Whoa! Back the fuck up, Luca,” I snarl, unwilling to let him attack our Boss. “Do you want me to list your sins from when you were in charge? Lio was kidnapped under your charge. Let’s not cast stones, because we’ll be here all night while I go over your fuck ups.”

Antonio laughs, trying to cover it with a cough. I thrust out my chin, waiting for Luca's response. If he knows what's good for him, he'll back down. Sadly, I've never known him to be smart.

Grumbling, Luca actually does shut up, even if he's still glaring at Lio. I want to say something, but it's not worth it. I don't need to fight all of Lio's battles. He wouldn't appreciate it if I did, and when Lio ignores Luca, it confirms I made the right choice.

"Message Marcus. See when he'll be here."

"No need, Boss. I'm here," Marcus states as he enters the office. Keegan isn't with him, but I suspect he stayed back with their son. He gives a small nod to Luca, but that's the warmest greeting he gets. I'd feel bad, but...no.

"Good," Lio says as he keeps his attention on Marcus. "I need your expertise."

Marcus nods encouragingly. There's a reason Il Padrone nicknamed him War. Allesandro taught him strategy so well that I don't think he can even turn it off.

"When we go into Amato territory tonight...how do I treat Roman?"

"Ah, because you're used to hanging out as friends?" Marcus clarifies as he comes closer, stopping just behind my chair. It forces Luca back further, since he originally tried to take that position.

"Yes. I know things have changed now that we're both Heads of the Family. But does that change our relationship or how we interact?"

Frowning, Marcus doesn't answer right away, his eyes are unfocused as he seemingly starts thinking through the issue. Finally, he clears his throat and gives his attention to Lio.

“I would take my cues from him. But yes, things have changed. You’ll want to treat him with careful respect. Remember, you’re dealing with another Family, not your friend. However, if he chooses to react as a friend, then you can continue that way. It may start one way and transition. I’m not sure. This isn’t a situation I’ve seen before. We typically don’t...mix. Even for Families that are blood related. It’s just not done.”

“Alright.” Lio takes a bracing breath before rising. “Let’s head out. Benjamin, Marcus, Ignacio, and Luca, you’re with me. Antonio—please keep watch on everything. We’ll be back. Hopefully, with answers.”

“Of course, Boss,” Antonio says, before he stops Lio on the way out to the limo. It’s hard to hear, but I believe Antonio wishes Lio luck. I really hope we don’t need it...

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:05 am*

Struggling into my closet seems like the most insurmountable task of the day. Which is ridiculous, but after running on crisis mode all day, such a simple decision like choosing what fucking suit to wear feels impossible.

The feel of hands on my shoulders make me jump, but the familiar weight of them, paired with the whisper into my ear, helps calm my racing heart. “Shh, it’s just me, Little Prince.”

“Ten.” His name is barely a gasp, but in the closed confines of our closet, it sounds loud.

“What do you need, Roman?”

“I...I don’t know. Nothing, everything... Just...make it go away.”

He hums softly, his hands on my shoulders tightening a bit. “On your knees,” he orders softly, spinning me around.

It’s easy to comply, and is even easier to accept his half-hard cock in my mouth once he pulls it out. “That’s it. You’re going to take it all, Giocattolo. I don’t plan on stopping until I’ve had my fill of you. I’m going to take everything from you, so prepare yourself.”

I moan, the sound relaxing my throat and giving him the perfect opportunity to slide deep inside. Feeling him harden inside my mouth makes my cock throb, even as the burning stretch steals my breath and doesn’t give it back.



Yes...this...the utter lack of control I have, even over my own life, is exactly what I need. Too many decisions need to be made by me, too much control is making me feel powerless.

As Tennant grabs the back of my head, his fingers tightening in my hair and pushing me deeper onto his still-filling cock, I know he's feeling the same way. We both need to feel in control again, and this is how we do that: me by giving it up, and him by taking mine away.

Spots appear in my vision as I choke on his cock, and Ten pulls away just enough for me to take a much-needed breath.

When I meet his icy eyes, my breath catches and my heart pounds. Whoever tries to claim Ten doesn't have any emotions hasn't had him staring down at them while his dick is halfway down their throat.

Being the center of his world is an aphrodisiac, and it takes all of the lessons I've learned over the years to not come.

With his grip on my hair, he holds me close and slams his cock all the way into my mouth and throat again. I grip his thighs, holding on and taking the punishing pace, knowing I am nothing but a hole for his pleasure.

My vision dims and my heart pounds in my ears. My head is both heavy and light at the same time, and when I'm allowed a gasping breath, I don't know what's up or down.

Words fall from Tennant's mouth, but none of them register as I'm too far gone to pay attention.

My eyes are full of tears, and as he pulls away to let me breathe, I let them fall. My

emotional breakdown earlier was far from enough to calm the maelstrom. But here, with Ten's hand in my hair and his cock keeping warm in my mouth, I don't have to worry about anything except what he wants.

"That's it, Little Prince," he whispers. "Take what you need from me. I'm going to fill you with my cum. Just hold still and let me."

As if I can do anything else. Or would want to.

Over and over he fucks my face, dragging me onto his dick when slamming into me isn't enough. He gives more than he takes, and that's the beauty of Tennant that no one but me, Hollis, and Jude will ever understand.

Even as his cock thickens, stretching my mouth impossibly wider, he tightens his grip in my hair more, on the verge of pulling it out. It's a release in itself, and everything I need.

When he comes, it's overflowing, spilling out the corners of my mouth. He pulls out and doesn't let a drop go to waste, scooping every last bit up and shoving his fingers into my mouth.

When he's finished, he wipes the tears from my cheeks and helps me to my feet. His kiss is as brutal as his dick just was, and I melt against him, taking everything he's willing to give.

"I love you," I whisper.

"I know. Now, get dressed. We're out of time."

Despite his words, he holds me close a moment more before letting me go. Taking a stuttering breath, I turn back to the rack I was standing in front of when he found me,

and pull out a suit.

“You sure?” he asks. He's not trying to talk me out of it, but he knew I was saving it for a special occasion.

“It's the right one,” is all I can say.

The suit is as black as the ones Tennant favors, but the accompanying shirt is a deep burgundy that makes my dark green eyes pop. The biggest difference is that there aren't pants, but a custom-tailored pleated skirt. Normally, my skirt suits come with pencil skirts, as it's what's “normal” for that style of clothing.

But...if this is my first stand as Boss, then I need to be me .

Anyone who has a problem with that will meet the wrong side of my blade.

Waiting in my father's office for our guests has my nerves running full force once again. Thankfully, I'm not alone, and that's the only reason I can stand behind my father's desk like it's my own.

My family—sans Leandro—is here, and I take strength from that. Even if Carter standing near Hollis's corner, rather than behind me, is disconcerting. Jude stands off to my side, his quiet, steady presence helping with the newness of everything.

Tennant leans against the wall between the door and desk, idly twirling a knife between his fingers. I'd tell him to put it away, but Carter has one as well, and I'm reluctant to take that comfort away from him. So being a fair and magnanimous leader, I don't say anything to either of them.

I'm already over this “being in charge thing”.

The knock on the door has me flinching. Tennant opens it to Joel, and though I know the words he's about to say, I wish he wouldn't.

“The Martellis are here. Shall I escort them in, Boss?”

I nod once, as it's the only thing I can do with everything else locked tight in tension.

“Are you sure I should be here?” Soren asks, as he gets up from where he was sitting and finds a place where Jude can easily see him.

“Yes. I don't know how this is going to go, and I won't have Jude at a disadvantage. If they have a problem with it... I'll gladly let out some steam.”

“Careful, Amore,” Hollis warns. “We don't want to put them off right away.”

I grit my teeth but don't respond. Too many things are running through my brain to come up with an appropriate response.

The sharp knock on the door is a welcome distraction, and Joel pushes it open when Tennant gives the okay.

As the Martellis file in, my heart pounds, and I want nothing more than to sink into the chair behind me to prevent my knees from buckling.

Lio looks...determined. He's not my friend Lio anymore. He's Emilio, Allesandro Martelli's future husband, and the Head of the Martelli Family.

“Thank you for coming,” I say, flicking my gaze briefly over everyone, stopping momentarily on the last face I expected to see. I might not have met him before, but I'd be stupid to not know all of the players on their side.

What I don't have is the brain power to figure out why fucking Luca is here when he should be far away from either of our territories, and I certainly can't ask right now.

“Thank you for extending the invitation. We have a lot to discuss.”

“We do. First,” I gesture to Jude. “This is Jude Manassero. He is my Second in Command. And that's Soren, he's assisting for now.”

Luca scowls and takes a step forward. “You gave explicit instructions on how many of us were allowed. You want to be Boss? Follow your own damn rules.”

Before Lio or anyone on his side can protest, or do anything about his outburst, Tennant is moving. His hand is around Luca's throat, and I imagine his knife is pressed against him.

“Did you miss exactly what Soren is doing?” Tennant asks in that familiar, spine-tingling conversational tone of his.

Stepping to the side, he forces Luca to look at Soren and Jude. “Would you like to tell my lover that he can't have his interpreter here again? Just so I can make sure I heard you right.”

Luca struggles, but Tennant squeezes his throat until his face turns red.

“I will gut you right here and drench your Family in your blood if they try to save you. Speak about things you don't understand one more time, I dare you.”

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:05 am*

Fuck! This is not how I wanted to start this meeting. The only reason I brought Luca is because he's more familiar with the area and this type of situation. He was a Second for years. And now he wants to fuck up?

"Luca! You will apologize to our allies—now." I grind my teeth while trying to keep my face blank. I want to tell him to shut the fuck up, but I'm already starting at a disadvantage as a Boss thanks to him.

"I apologize for my outburst." Scowling, he dips his head toward Jude. I ignore it for now, but I learned from the best. If he thinks he'll escape punishment, he'll learn otherwise. I wave him back as Benjamin comes forward to stand beside me.

"Benjamin serves as my Second, and we are honored to meet Jude." I bite back the urge to ask if there's anything we need to do differently. They would have told me, and from the glares we're getting, asking such a question would only cause more offense.

I know my friend. He wouldn't pick just anyone to be his Second, so it's best to not seem as if I'm questioning his decision.

"If you would please accept our apologies so that we can move forward."

Roman lifts an eyebrow before nodding decisively. "Let's get this done."

We take our seats quietly. I'm surprised Roman doesn't sit at the desk, reinforcing that we're in his territory. Instead, he sits next to me, forcing our Seconds to take up spots nearby. The last time we were here, it was Roman's father and Master sitting

exactly like this as they laid out a truce. Now we're the ones enacting it as we prepare for war...

"Our Family had a conversation with the person who set Il Padrone up. It was one of the wedding planners. She was chosen because she didn't want to work for 'criminals' after her brother died of an overdose."

There's a snort from someone in the office, but I don't pay attention to it. The irony of her calling us criminals when she set someone up to be kidnapped and possibly killed... Well, I took care of that situation.

"How was she communicating with this asshole? This shows some major premeditation. Whoever is pulling the strings had to search for someone like her."

"Via phone. Marcus brought it for Hollis. And yes, that level of research is disturbing. It makes me wonder just what resources they have. After all, they had to comb through different backgrounds and then make a guess on who would turn—because only a fucking idiot would take on the Family. And knowing Cristian is gone? Whoever has them signed their death warrant. They have two of the best Families coming their way."

"I'll take the phone," Hollis interjects, snapping it out from Marcus's hands. I want to roll my eyes at his impatience, but I'm anxious enough that I don't. However, it doesn't mean I can't throw my weight around a little.

"Marcus sent you the CCTV footage. Were you able to get anything from them, or should I have had my men on it?"

I bite the inside of my cheek at the rising tension in the room. Benjamin draws closer, but stays out of it. Going after the hacker extraordinaire, and partner to probably most of the people in this room, including Roman? Yeah, I'm going to say this is probably

a bad idea, but damn is it worth it.

Furious voices shout out, and I catch the words “death wish”, but I ignore it all.

Roman stares at me steadily, the only one not reacting to me being an asshole. “You had to push them, did you?”

“Of course. I need to know we’ll be able to work together—even when someone fucks up. You know our Families, that’s going to happen.”

“We didn’t kill Luca. You didn’t need to add gas to the fire,” Roman retorts, shaking his head, but I see a small bit of humor in his eyes. My friend embraces chaos as much as I do.

I smile as the arguments continue around us, drowning out our conversation. “Eh, as long as they don’t kill each other, we’re fine. We will get your father back. I will not stop until both he and Il Padrone are found. Nothing in this world is safe from me. I’ll burn it all to the ground.”

I didn’t notice the room becoming quiet until Tennant cuts in. “You won’t be the only one burning the world down.”

Twisting, I meet his hard eyes, unflinchingly despite the predator vibes rolling off him. I live with a lion of my own, and know not to mistake a predator for a kitty. I’d never underestimate him, but he’s not an issue. No, I’ll welcome his violence as we tear this place apart to find our men.

“As for your question,” Hollis’s voice cuts in and draws my attention away from his lover. “I did look through what was sent—and even more, since your Family doesn’t know how to compile shit.”



The words hang in the air, as if daring me to attack. Instead, I shrug and lean back in my chair, clasping my hands together. “Very well. Where is Il Padrone?”

“Because it’s so easy to find a needle in the haystack. They shoved him in a van that looks like every other van out there. They managed to find the only fucking blindspot in the city, and poof!

“Leandro was able to follow their trail for a while, but lost them due to some camera malfunctions. The city isn’t known for keeping up to date with their tech. Tennant sent some guards—you’re welcome—to check it out.

“We found the van, and a driver with a bullet hole in his head. Whoever is doing this isn’t being sloppy. Based on that, I’d assume that whatever I find on the wedding planner’s phone, it won’t be much—or even accurate.

“You’re asking for a miracle, and last I checked, I’m not fucking Santa, or a genie. Go ahead and get your people in on the search, but I guarantee they won’t find half the stuff I will, even if you give them a week. But if you want to be a negligent asshole and risk losing the only chance you might have at finding your precious Master... Be my guest.”

I glance sideways at Roman, checking to see if he’ll correct his lover from calling me an asshole. When he doesn’t, I sigh mentally. I fucking hate this, but there is no way Master would have accepted being talked to like that, even if I do understand it.

Surprisingly, I don’t have to jump in. Instead, Benjamin moves from behind me, the knife that’s suddenly in his hand now pointed at Hollis. With a colder voice than I thought possible, he threatens, “If you call our Boss an asshole, or any other derogatory term again, you will answer to me.”

My lips twitch in amusement at the way Hollis shuts up. I don’t think he’s scared at

all, but is more shocked that my friend has come this far. If things were tense before, this makes it even worse. At least, until Tennant starts laughing. My jaw drops and I swivel my head to stare at him.

“Nobody will touch Hollis except me, so put the knife away.” Benjamin glances at me. I nod to give him permission, but keep one eye on Tennant. This situation is more volatile than I expected it to become. Fucking hell, how did Il Padrone manage this shit? “Impressive as a Second, though. Foolish, but impressive. I think you could benefit from the same lessons Jude will be taking. Let’s see how much of a Second you can be.”

“Wait! If anyone is going to train him, it should be me!” Luca cuts in, and I struggle not to roll my eyes.

Considering how he fucked us from the start, I don’t want him anywhere near the Amatos right now. I cut that off quickly and consider Tennant’s offer. Benjamin has been excellent so far, but I know his distaste for violence will become an issue. Not to mention, this may strengthen our alliance by showing that much trust.

I give a shrug. “Thank you for the offer. We’ll accept it, but with two caveats. You don’t kill him, and no permanent injuries.”

“Fine on the first. I make no promises on the second.” Tennant’s voice guarantees pain, and I shift in my seat. It’s too close to the voice Il Padrone uses, and right now, I could use a physical outlet to relieve this stress. Tennant is way off limits though.

Benjamin puts his knife away and squares his shoulders as he moves closer to Tennant. My jaw drops in shock when he leans further in and snarls, “Bring it.”

Ignacio hisses, and I shudder. I thought we fucked up in the beginning, but now? Now we’re just fucked. And from Tennant’s evil grin, he knows it, too.

Swallowing, I glance at Roman, hoping to see some amount of reassurance, but there's none. Great .

My best friend just signed up to be tortured by a psychopath, only so he can better fulfil his role. One he hopefully won't be in for long, because I will have my Master back soon, and given the way Roman looks at me, he's making the same silent promise about his father. If only we can survive working together, we may just have a chance.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:05 am*

This meeting is going just about as well as I could have predicted. It's hard enough working with another Family when it comes to business dealings, but this is much more than that. The stakes are higher, and the atmosphere in the room is...volatile.

I stare at Benjamin, impressed by what I see in his sea green eyes. It's not enough to convince me he's ready for the position he's been thrust into, but there's promise—enough that I'm happy to take him under my wing.

He's also very, very lucky I was able to divert his attention. Hollis is holding himself back for Roman's sake, but there's a difference between letting me handle the insult to Jude and allowing someone to threaten him. It's only his utter trust in me that allowed me to swiftly defuse the situation.

It's bad enough that the one they should have killed long ago disrespected Jude, the last thing we need is to make another enemy because they pushed Hollis too far. His respect for Roman's position only goes so far, especially when they've already shown they're unwilling to get rid of those who don't know their place...

“As Hollis said, I've sent men out to do ground work at both scenes. They'll canvas the area, before moving on to where the van and body were found. I have low expectations, but nobody is perfect. This kidnapping may be textbook, but they'll have to fuck up eventually, and when they do...” I let my words hang in the air, as my lips stretch into a grin that I'm sure is more than a little feral.

Whoever decided to fuck with us is either brave or really fucking stupid. Either way, there's nothing anyone in this room wouldn't do to get back what's ours.

“And the matter I asked Hollis about earlier?” Emilio asks.

I can't decide if the boy really does have a death wish, or if he's just trying to establish his rule. Whichever it may be, I hope his Second reminds him to tread lightly. I may be the one officially diagnosed with anti-social personality disorder here, but my lover is a whole different beast. Just because he doesn't often get his hands dirty, doesn't mean he won't if pushed too far. And not even Roman's fledgling reputation as a Boss will stand in his way.

“I need time. As good as I am, I cannot be in two places at once, even with help. I have programs running to do a deep dive for anything that even hints at either of our Families. As I said before, there's been chatter, but nothing concrete.

“The one possible culprit has been more careful than anyone else. I'm hesitant to say they're the one targeting us, only because there's no proof. Hiding your tracks is the smart thing to do, as you never know who you'll run into on those sites. Being good enough that not even I have been able to trace them isn't an admission of guilt... If you wanted to be sure, I could ask my brother to take a stab at it.”

“No,” Emilio says vehemently. “No outsiders. We've already found one traitor amongst us, who's to say there isn't more? Have you started to clear your people yet?”

Tension coils inside me at the thought of someone on the inside betraying us. After everything we've been through, the last thing this Family needs is another traitor.

“We have,” Carter says. “I have people I trust on it, and Leandro will start running his own checks once he's finished with the tasks Hollis set him. Unlike you, though, we don't have any outsiders on our payroll.”

“You sure about that?” Emilio's attention flicks to Jude for a moment, before

focusing back on Carter. “Your father is still alive, isn’t he?”

Carter flips his knife over in his hand. The silent threat is clear, but I know him well enough to know he respects the new Boss’s spirit. “I’ll be having a conversation with him in the next few days. While I’ll never trust him, Georgio has never done anything to make me doubt his loyalty. Even when we killed his lover. He knows his place.”

Jude shifts a little and I watch him carefully. The way he carefully shifts his weight, and the slight grimace on his face, tells me it’s his leg that’s giving him trouble.

I know better than to draw attention to it, though. Roman told me about their conversation when he named Jude as his Second. Our Agnellino doesn’t want to look weak. He doesn’t want Roman to have a disadvantage because Jude dares to need accommodations, not only for his deafness, but the injury he sustained while dealing with his family that’ll follow him for the rest of his life.

Voicing my concern over his discomfort won’t win me any favors, not after I already rode to his rescue when that bastard insulted him. Taking care of those under my protection is first nature, and Jude has already been through enough with his family. Anyone daring to come into his home and disrespect him will only ever make that mistake once.

Luca is lucky he’s a Martelli...or maybe unlucky. Just because Il Padrone isn’t here, doesn’t mean the rules still don’t apply, and I’m curious to watch as Emilio steps up to the plate.

The conversation shifts from De Luca’s loyalty to more practical things, such as how to pool our resources. “Hollis and Leandro have all the virtual stuff down,” Roman says before pausing for a moment, as if to give Emilio a chance to once again challenge Hol. When nobody says anything, he continues. “Carter and Tennant are in charge of our men, so I’d suggest coordinating with them on how best to utilize both

forces.”

“That’s Marcus’s area of expertise; he’s the strategist here,” Emilio responds.

We already knew that, of course, but it’s nice to know that Emilio trusts those around him to do their jobs.

“I’ll be happy to have you join me,” I tell Marcus, meeting his eyes briefly. “I have people in place to coordinate the men on the ground, but I would appreciate your insight. You can bring Benjamin to me so I can start his training.”

Ignacio doesn’t hide his dislike of his lover being under me, but I ignore him. If he doesn’t trust Benjamin and his abilities, their relationship won’t survive under the pressure of Benjamin's new responsibilities.

I meet Benjamin’s gaze, once more impressed by the determination I see in them. “Come prepared,” I tell him. “I’m going to break you.” I look to Jude. “Both of you.” With my attention back on Benjamin, I smile at him. “And remember, first impressions are important, so impress me.”

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:05 am*

Thankfully, the meeting disperses shortly afterward with no more drama. I have enough of a headache. I do stay back a moment as I want to talk with Roman alone. I wave Benjamin away as Roman and I stand. I lightly touch Roman's arm, hoping I'm not going to piss anyone else off.

"I'm here. If you need to talk. We may be the Bosses, but we're not alone. You're still my friend, and we're both going to need each other to get through this." He doesn't respond, aside from giving a sharp nod of understanding. I lean a little closer and drop my voice, "Oh, and by the way, I love what you're wearing."

I don't stick around to see his response, but catch up to Benjamin, who looks like he's ready to panic. His tension lessens when I'm within reach, but it doesn't fully leave until we're in the limo heading back to our territory. I stare at Luca before glancing at Marcus. I incline my head toward Luca and receive a nod from Marcus.

"I think that went well." Luca pipes up and I grip my hands together to keep from doing—or saying—something that will result in an issue right now. "Of course, I still believe Benjamin should be taking lessons from me, instead of that psychopath, but at least this will help strengthen the ties between us. And he can keep an eye on those Amatos. I don't know if I trust them..."

I growl, unable to let that pass. "Luca, Tennant is very good at what he does. Even Master acknowledged that. They're giving us an honor. And I don't care if you don't trust them. We're on the same side. We have to work together. That won't happen if you keep putting your head up your ass!"

"Look, I am not thrilled about Tennant training Benjamin," Ignacio cuts in. "But he is



well known for what he does. And both Families have their own strengths. Combining them together makes the most sense. We have a mutual goal. For now, let's focus on that."

We all lapse into silence as the drive continues. There's a thick feeling of anticipation, and it's only when we reach the mansion that I can breathe. I bite my lip as I wait for them all to exit before me. That shit is going to take some time to get used to. Once we are in the entryway, Marcus grabs Luca, locking his arms behind him before he starts marching him upstairs.

"What the fuck are you doing?!" Luca fights against Marcus, which is foolish considering Marcus is far stronger. None of us bother to address his shouting. He'll find out soon enough.

I turn toward Benjamin, frowning. "I do think that Tennant will be a good teacher, but be careful. He's not to be fucked with."

"I can do this." Benjamin's steely voice almost takes me by surprise. It's not what I'm used to with my best friend, but he's certainly embracing his role as my Second. It pains me slightly as I still remember when he was innocent of this world, but there's nobody I'd rather have standing behind me than him.

"I have no doubts about you. Go ahead and get some rest. You'll need it. I need to go take care of something."

"I expected better from Luca, despite his issues in the past." Ignacio sighs and shakes his head. "He fucked up. He's been away too long. Need any help with the situation?"

"No, I've got this. Ignacio, I want you to run down more of that wedding planner. Hollis is right. We won't pull anything from her electronics relating to the guy behind this. So let's see what we can find on her instead."

I don't bother waiting for confirmation before I head up the stairs. Marcus is leaning against the door to the playroom, waiting for me. "You good?"

At least he doesn't ask if I need help, even if I'm fucking nervous to be the one on this side of the equation. Of all the things I thought I'd have to do as Head of the Family, this wasn't on my radar. But fuck if I'll let Master down. And if that means teaching Luca a lesson...well, I'm not going to hide from it. At least it's fucking Luca. I can't say I've ever forgiven him for trying to kill me in the past.

"I've got this," I finally reply to Marcus.

Looking me up and down, he pushes off the door. "I don't have any doubt. Try not to let it go too far. We all know your history with him. All of our history."

He clasps my shoulder before disappearing down the stairs, likely heading to his partner and their son. Rolling my shoulders, I take one last deep breath before shoving the door open. As it closes with a snick, I stop and stare at the scene in front of me.

Luca's been stripped naked and is hanging by manacles from the ceiling. His feet aren't locked down, and having been in his position multiple times, I'm not sure if that's good or bad. On one hand, it won't leave bruises on his ankles if there's strong impact play. On the other hand, it's a headfuck to force him into being still and take what's given. It's time to see if he'll actually fall in line.

"What the fuck is going on?" Luca spits out, pulling at the chains. It's a struggle not to roll my eyes.

"What's going on is that you fucked up. You almost cost us our alliance. Not only did you insult Jude, but you wouldn't shut the fuck up, thinking that you're somehow more in charge than I am. I am now the Boss. Neither of us may want that, but it's the

fucking truth.

“You don’t have a role. Benjamin is my Second because I trust him. So far, you’re not giving me any reason to believe you can be helpful. What’s to stop me from putting you on a plane back to where you’re supposed to be? Where Il Padrone told you to be.”

“He would want me here! You’re too new to this!”

“I see we need to come to an agreement here...and by agreement, I mean, you need to learn your fucking place. Don’t worry, Master taught me how to give out punishments.” I bare my teeth at him and he recoils as much as he can, worry finally seeping in—about fucking time.

I turn around and head toward Master’s wall of toys. There are so many options, from floggers to canes, and everything in between. Hell, I don’t think I’ve even been able to play with all of them—whether as a punishment or for fun. Master keeps us in line with his brand of sexual sadism, and it’s fucking perfect. I know I won’t come close to the deviousness he would dish out, but fuck if I won’t try to at least make him proud.

Grabbing one of the push carts, I place a few things on it. A paddle, a cane, a whip, and I even toss a prostate massager onto it. Forced orgasms can be an excellent form of torture, but fuck, I don’t think he deserves an ounce of pleasure.

I push the table over to where he’s been left hanging and check him over impassively. I’ll never understand him. Fuck, I don’t understand why Master still has any amount of love for him. Then again, who the hell said love makes any fucking sense.

Luca barely glances at the toys. I’m sure he thinks I can’t do anything worthwhile to him. When I pull my knife out, his eyes widen and I laugh softly.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Luca asks, his voice an octave higher than normal.

“I’m reminding you exactly where you belong—which is not anywhere near the top. You want to be here? Fine. Then prove you deserve it, and most of all, understand that you’re on the same level as the Boys. You aren’t in charge of them, you sure as fuck aren’t above Benjamin, and you don’t come close to me. I. Am. In. Charge. Right now? I own all of you.”

Before he can say anything, I place the flat side of my knife against his neck, drawing it from one side to the other. He flinches and I grunt at his inability to keep still. Flipping the knife over, I slowly drag the sharp edge along the same path. It’s a shallow cut, but enough to watch blood swell up and drip down. I cock my head as I start to drag my knife down the middle of his body, keeping the wound superficial, even if I’m tempted to go deeper.

Luca presses his feet against the floor, pushing himself backward. Growling, I reach for him as he spits out, “What the fuck?! Are you a psychopath?!”

Sighing, I grab his arm, pulling him closer toward me. “Compliments won’t get you anywhere. Now stay still or you’ll run the risk of me going deeper.”

“Fuck,” he mutters as I continue my path, stopping right before his dick.

Humming, I stroke him to hardness, almost clinically. I don’t give a fuck if it’s pleasurable, but I want him to realize everything comes down to me. He no longer has a say in anything. Luca gasps in pleasure as I add a twist on the upstroke, and I chuckle darkly, pressing the knife in just above his cock.

“You’re going to come. If you don’t, I’ll cut off your dick. I want you to remember this feeling—the way I have you in pain and pleasure. I control both, and if you fuck

up again? You'll only feel the pain."

Going deeper with the knife, as I continue to bring him to the edge, I sweep my thumb through the blood and add it to the hand job. It's a horrible lube, but it's something at least. I tighten my grip as I lean forward and whisper in his ear.

"Come. Now!" With that command, he lets go, and I wait until he finishes before I remove my knife. Smiling, I show him the bloody tip. "Now we know how to get you off. I'll remember that if needed again. But, I don't think you've learned your lesson yet."

"Oh fuck," he mutters as his legs go soft and the manacles carry most of his weight. I wink at him as I grab the paddle, moving behind him.

"Now, I remember when you gave me a punishment. Let's see if you feel the same way when I do it to you." I gently run my fingers down his back, encouraging some of the tension to leave. I carefully tap his ass with the paddle. "Count."

I strike the globes of his ass, knowing not to go up any higher. I start out light before ramping up the intensity. I chose this paddle for a reason. It's drilled out with one word: Mine. I want him to be able to feel it and remember that while he's here, and I'm Head of the Family, he belongs to me.

By the time I reach twenty, he's crying. At thirty, he breaks down and I back off, finishing with five light taps to bring him down. I press my fingers against the word covering his ass, loving the heat. I briefly consider fucking him, but discard it. While an orgasm may reduce my stress, I have no desire to reach it with Luca. At least not right now.

I carefully put the paddle back on the cart before I undo the manacles. With an oomph, I catch Luca as he collapses into me. I grit my teeth as I struggle to move him

to the bed in the playroom. I finally manage to make it over there, and unceremoniously dump him onto it.

Sighing, I grab the arnica cream so that I can treat his ass. I rub it in, trying to be gentle as he starts to come around.

“I won’t interfere again.” His voice is scratchy from the sobs, but it’s enough.

“Good. Because I don’t want to have to punish you again. Especially because next time I won’t be so nice.”

“Yes, Boss.”

I breathe out, letting the tension flow out of my body. That acknowledgement is what I needed. “Get some rest. We’re going to need all hands on deck to find our Master.”

It’s the only small peace offering I can give right now. I make sure he has a glass of water next to the bed before I leave, letting him slip into sleep. When I walk out of the room, I’m not surprised to find Benjamin waiting, even though I gave him time off.

“He still alive?”

“Yeah, I was careful.” I run my right hand through my hair, resisting the urge to yank on it. Fuck.

“You’re already doing great as a Boss. It’ll get easier in time. Now, how about we get you some coffee to cheer you up?” Benjamin nudges my side, drawing a smile from me.

“Only if we can terrorize the chef.”

“I have no idea why the two of you like to fuck with each other so much, but whatever. If it makes you happy.” Benjamin snorts as I follow him down the stairs, taking in the crystal chandelier when we get to the bottom.

The sight causes me to flash back to the moment I met Master, and how I had no clue what was going to happen. Both Benjamin and I were brought into the Family through unconventional—and unwilling—means, but look at us now.

“It does. Oh, and I get to remind him I’m the Boss now. That will definitely be fun.”

Benjamin’s loud laugh reverberates in the entryway. My own laugh is more muted, but it’s there. Thank fuck for his friendship. It’s the only way I may get through this.

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:05 am*

My chair is yanked out from behind my desk and I jump, gasping at the sudden motion. Turning away from the screen, I blink, my eyes dry and gritty from staring at the monitors for too long.

“I have work to do,” I say, glaring up at Tennant.

He shakes his head. “It can wait until the morning.”

“It really can’t. In case you didn’t hear, Ten, Cristian is missing . So is Il Padrone. I need to find them.”

He reaches for me and I pull my knife on him, better trained now than I was before. Not that Ten cares. He takes the cut to his forearm as he grabs my chin, forcing my gaze to stay on his as he squeezes my flesh between his tight fingers.

“It can wait,” he says again, his tone carefully controlled. “Do whatever you need to, and then we’re going upstairs. Roman needs us more right now.”

“You can’t use him against me.”

“I can, and I will. Hurry up before I drag you out of here.” His calm, level tone doesn’t change, but I know a threat when I hear one, though it’s more like a promise. Fucker’s done it before.

With a long, drawn-out sigh, I pull out of his grasp and turn back to my monitor. Getting automations up and running is easy, as most of them were already doing the bulk of the work. I just needed to sift through the information they gathered, while



also pulling profiles on anyone who could have possibly turned on us.

Setting alerts for all of our devices, I finally put my workstation into sleep mode and allow Ten to pull me out of the chair.

“Where’s Leandro?” I ask, as he leads me out of the office.

He huffs a laugh and shakes his head. “I sent him to bed about an hour ago. You were so lost in your own world, you didn’t notice. Nor did you seem to realize I was in the room with you at all.”

I grimace. “Sorry. It’s just...it’s been a long fucking day.”

Tennant stops and moves in front of me, staring me down. In the darkened hallway, his harsh features and light blue eyes should be terrifying, but I know him too well to ever be afraid.

There might be something wrong with me.

He lifts my face to meet his gaze, his fingers are cool against my skin as they press gently under my chin. There’s barely two inches of height between us, but at times like this, he makes me feel so...small and vulnerable. I should be prey to his predator, but instead, I’ve never felt safer.

“You’re doing what you do best,” he says, his low voice sounding loud in the dark and silent house. “While it...annoys me that Emilio feels the need to challenge you, I also know there’s no one any of us would rather have in charge of finding the Bosses.”

“Did you forget our Giocattolo is the Boss, not me?”

Ten's grin is small but it lights up his cold eyes. "How could I? He makes for a fine Boss, even if he doesn't believe so. But, while he sits at the helm, we all know that none of us would be here without you. Which means, I need you to take care of yourself." He sighs and moves his hand from my face to my hair, roughly gripping the strands. "I don't know how much longer I can hold on, Tesoro. I can feel my sense of...civility drifting away. There's a reason Cristian keeps me close. I need you to take care of yourself. I need you to help Roman, and keep him in line—I don't know how much I'll be able to. Not once I have Jude and Benjamin to train, and whatever plan Marcus helps enact."

I hear what he doesn't say: Tennant is worried he'll care too much about Cristian, and getting revenge, to worry about Roman's emotional state. That he cares at all—even if he won't classify it as caring—shows there's far more to this man than anyone who hears the word "psychopath" would believe.

The problem is, Tennant has always been our emotional rock. How would either of us fare without that? Trial by fire, I suppose. Because Jude is worse at emotions than Tennant is—and his new role will bring along its own set of worries for us all.

I trust Roman's judgment, though. And agree he made the right choice in his Second. If anyone is the perfect person to stand behind him, it's our take no shit lover.

"I promise," I finally say. "I'll take care of you all."

It's my job, after all. Tennant may be our backbone, but my obsession with them all is what keeps us together. I won't let them falter.

"Good. Now, upstairs. You need sleep, and our Little Lamb needs some support with our Toy."

In our bedroom, we find Roman curled up in Jude's lap. The two of them are a sight

to behold. Both dark haired with green eyes, in vastly different shades, Roman is small enough to curl into himself and fit against Jude's broad chest perfectly. If only the emotions in the room weren't so volatile. I'd love nothing more than to ravish them both.

"Is he awake?" I sign, not wanting to disturb Roman if he's managed to fall asleep.

Jude nods. "Tense. Stressed. Don't know if he'll sleep tonight." His signs are loose and sloppy, his hands barely leaving Roman to reply.

"If you're going to talk about me," Roman grouses, "at least have the decency to do it aloud."

Climbing onto the bed, I pull Roman from Jude's lap into my own. "Sorry, Amore. I didn't want to disturb you."

"I'm fine. Just...processing. I didn't get nearly enough time to do that today before everything with the Martellis. Do you think we can trust them?" He blinks those devastated dark green eyes up at me, and my heart cracks at the lost expression.

"Yes," I say honestly. "Despite Emilio's posturing, they're our allies. They need us far more than we need them. And I'm not just saying that to be arrogant. They reached out first, remember that. If I thought for a moment we couldn't trust them, I'd already be on the phone with H, getting the ball rolling there. He has far more contacts than I do. Though I am still owed enough favors from before I officially joined the Family, but I'd rather save those in case we need them down the line. I'm not opposed to reaching out anyway—no matter what Emilio says."

"Wait on it. See how far you and Leandro can get first on your own, before going that route."

“Of course.”

“Speaking of the Martellis.” Jude’s words have me looking up. He’s staring intently at Tennant as Ten takes a seat on the bed. I notice the bandage on his forearm,—he must have cleaned himself up in the bathroom—but I’m not concerned as I know I didn’t cut him too deeply. “I don’t need you fighting my battles for me.”

“No,” Tennant agrees. “Especially not now, as at the moment, you outrank me. I might have a higher position than a regular soldier, but it is now my job to keep you safe—more so than ever before. When someone insults you, it’s a direct insult to Roman, and his position in this Family.”

Jude scowls. “There’s a reason I have concerns.”

“I know,” Ten replies before Roman can reassure him. “But I agree, you’re the best person for the job. You’re level-headed in a way Leandro isn’t. You grew up in this world, even if it was on the fringes, but that’s more your family’s doing than a fault of your own. You’ve taken to every task we’ve set you thus far. The only one who doesn’t think you’re capable is you, but that’s your upbringing, not how you really feel.”

“You don’t have to be so smug about being right,” Jude grouches.

Tennant beams. “Don’t I?”

“Be nice,” I warn Tennant.

He huffs but leans over and presses a gentle kiss to Jude’s lips. He pulls back just enough for signing space.

“Agnellino.” The homesign tips off his fingers with as much care as if he had said it

aloud. “I won't apologize for taking that asshole in hand. I'll do it again and again, if need be. I am aware you don't need me to fight your battles for you, but I'll be damned if anyone comes in here acting like they're better than you. If he steps out of line again, I'll simply hold him down so you can teach him why you shouldn't be underestimated. Deal?”

Jude rolls his eyes but reaches for Tennant to pull him in again. “Fine.”

The next kiss they share is rough, neither giving in to the other, until they finally have to pull away for breath.

“Another good thing about your new role,” Tennant says, adjusting his position on the bed so he can grab a pillow and hand it to Jude. “I can finally step up your training.”

Jude shoves the extra pillow under his bad hip. “Oh joy. Are you telling Jayden? Because I volunteer to be far, far away from that conversation.”

Tennant grins. “Benjamin is a trained physical therapist, it's fine. Jayden can't possibly get upset, because technically, someone will be there to watch you.”

Jude doesn't look convinced, but he must agree that a distracted Tennant is a good one, because he doesn't protest. I'd feel bad for Benjamin, but well, he brought whatever happens on himself.

Tennant reaches for me and helps me shift across the bed, settling into Jude's other side, without having to set Roman down. The boy is still awake, but far less tense than when we first came in—that's all I can ask for at the moment.

Resting my head against the headboard, I close my eyes, letting Roman's weight, and the presence of my partners, settle me.

Whatever comes next isn't going to be pleasant, but the four of us have each other, and I'll be damned if I let go of them without a fight.

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:05 am*

The phone ringing jolts me awake. Groaning, I fumble for it on the bedside table. I answer it quickly, swinging my feet over the edge of the bed and pushing up into a seated position. I check the time while I grunt out, “What?”

“Fuck. Marcus, it’s bad.” The voice is rushed, but I immediately recognize Damien. It works better than ice water being thrown on me, because my captain is never anything but calm.

“What the hell is happening?” I snarl, standing up and heading for the closet. Whatever it is, I’m going to need to leave, I can fucking tell.

“Warehouse on 34th got hit. A raid. Jimmy and Alex were picked up. Everyone else got out.”

“FUCK!” I throw my clothes onto the bed as Keegan wakes up. I’d feel bad for waking my partner, but right now, there’s no time. “We just paid the cops off less than a week ago. Why the fuck are they raiding one of our weapons warehouses?”

“I don’t know, boss. This is crazy. First Il Padrone gets kidnapped, and now law enforcement comes after us? Do you think it’s connected?” Damien whispers, and my entire body flushes with anger—and fear.

“No, I’m sure that’s not it. We still have a Head of the Family. The cops know better than to fuck with us. I don’t know what’s going on, but I’ll figure it out. First thing, though, I need to get a lawyer down there. We need to bail Jimmy and Alex out. They’d better keep their fucking mouths shut.” I pull on pants as I’m talking, rapidly going through what needs to happen next in my mind.

“You know my cousin won’t talk. And Jimmy is loyal.”

I shake my head, even though he can’t see me. There’s never any guarantee with people. I know that better than anyone. I won’t rely on someone’s loyalty right now, especially with Il Padrone missing.

“Look, go lay low. I need to handle this shit show. Thanks for the heads up.”

I barely wait for his acknowledgment before I’m hanging up and dialing another number, praying that I’ll get out of this call with my life. Fuck knows this is my area, and now it’s all gone to shit. The line clicks open, but there’s silence.

“Boss.”

“What’s going on, Marcus?” Lio growls, and I hear the rustle of bedsheets and the click of a lamp in the background. Fuck, waking him up is never a good thing.

“Warehouse got raided. Two of our men were picked up.” I hold my breath as I plop down onto the bed. Keegan is already up and moving, so I can’t disturb him anymore than I have.

The silence on the other end of the call is disturbing. This could go either way. I’m not familiar yet with Lio’s style of leadership—none of us are.

“How the fuck is that possible?” I gulp at Lio’s soft voice. It seems he’s been taking lessons from Il Padrone, because I know that nothing good comes from that deadly tone.

“I’m not sure, but I will find out. We paid the police already. This shouldn’t have happened.”



“You’ve got that fucking right. Alright, give Jenna a call. Tell her I gave the go ahead for her to get her ass over to the jail. I want our men out of there. And fucking wake up one of our judges if you need to. You have two hours to find me what officer approved this shit, and what judge signed off on it.”

Lio hangs up and I toss my phone onto the bed, bending over and scrubbing my face with my hands. Because, fuck. That’s barely any time.

“What’s going on?” Keegan asks, as he comes and sits next to me, rubbing my back.

“Warehouse got raided by some fucking law enforcement. Two of our men are locked up. And I’ve got two hours to get hold of our lawyer, send her to the courthouse, wake up a judge, if needed, to get the men out. I also have to find out which cop and judge signed off on the raid in that time.”

“Leave Jenna to me. If I need to wake up a judge, I’ll let you know. I’ll drop Cole off with his Uncle Lio, and meet Jenna at the jail to see what I can find out without going that route.” I smile at Keegan, leaning against him.

“You realize Lio is now the Boss, right? I don’t think you can drop Cole off when he’s trying to get all this shit taken care of, especially when he’s waiting on information from me.”

“Mmm...that’s the point. Cole will distract him and give you time to get shit done. There’s always someone around to watch Cole if Lio does get distracted. Fuck knows that mansion has enough staff.” Keegan shudders at the thought of having so many people around, and I chuckle at his disdain. “I’m so fucking glad we don’t live with them. Now, come on. Go deal with the shitstorm. I’ll take care of my part.”

Turning to face him, I lean in and give him a kiss. It’s meant to be a peck, but like always, there’s no holding back with him. He deepens it and I shudder from the

desire coursing through me.

Damn . He always makes me feel so alive.

When he pulls back, I start to follow, but he puts his hands on my shoulders, keeping me where I'm at.

“Just one more?” I whine, but he shakes his head.

“You know it's never one more. Consider that an appetizer to hold you over until we get back. Now, get your ass out of here. We both have work to do.” Standing, I roll my eyes and turn to leave our room, jumping when he smacks my ass. “You know better than to roll your eyes at me.”

“Yes, Sir.” I turn and smirk at him before disappearing through the doorway.

While our house is much smaller than the mansion, it's not exactly that modest. When I finally make it out the side door and into the garage, I'm more than ready to get this shit done. I briefly consider pissing Keegan off by taking his Camaro, but discard it. That wouldn't lead to a fun punishment.

Instead, I grab the keys to my SUV. I pat the hood as I head to the driver's side. While Keegan may enjoy a sports car, I love the versatility of my SUV. Plus, I can fit more tied up bodies in it, despite what Keegan says about the trunk space in his car.

I click the garage door and gun it. Whoever decided to fuck with us is going to find out what a bad idea that was, because from the sound of Lio's voice? Living isn't going to be an option.

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*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:05 am*

“How many people can we spare?” I ask Joel.

“Not enough,” he replies. “I’ve already increased security around the most likely targets, and set up advanced scouts that will hopefully give enough notice for people to get the hell out of dodge. Orders that already have buyers is being moved as we speak, and our high-valued inventory is also being moved.”

“I don’t like it. Too much movement can draw attention to us, but we also can’t make ourselves easy targets.”

“I agree.” He hesitates a moment before saying, “You don’t actually think we’re at risk, do you? They’d be stupid to try something like that with us after they already hit the Martellis.”

Instead of answering, I turn to Jude, since this is the perfect teaching moment. “Thoughts? You’re a numbers person, what are our odds?”

He doesn’t roll his eyes at my words, but I can feel his disdain for them all the same. Despite his best efforts, he still can’t hide from me—it’s endearing.

“Not good. Joel’s right in that they won’t hit us the same way, since we’ll be more on guard, but...now is the perfect time to strike. We’re distracted because we’re securing our stash houses, and moving a lot of product at once. If I were them, I’d go after another part of the business.”

And he doesn’t understand why Roman chose him as a Second. His intelligence is part of the reason he’s perfect for the job, along with the knowledge he gained

growing up in the household of one of De Luca's main product distributors; the insights he has will be invaluable to Roman in the long run.

"You're right. Any ideas of what their next move might be?"

Before he can reply, my phone rings. Pulling it out, I see Hollis's name on the screen and I meet Jude's eyes as I answer. "Guess we're about to find out the answer to our question," I sign. To Hollis, I ask, "How much damage is there?"

His tone is dry. "Enough to keep our lawyers happy."

Fuck. "Who got picked up?"

"Giulio Ricci and three of his dealers."

"Fucking hell," I spit.

Joel and Jude watch me with open curiosity.

"That was pretty much Roman's reaction, too. He's already called Sinclair to deal with it. Carter's getting in touch with everyone else now—Roman wants to delay this week's distribution and re-supply."

"Good idea. We've already moved all the drugs around. I'll let my guys know to be on alert. Make sure Carter expresses the need to lie low, otherwise they'll become training tools for Jude and Benjamin. Speaking of the Martellis, have you or Roman spoken to them?"

Hollis huffs a laugh. "Roman has, yes. Emilio is sending Benjamin your way, and is also bringing you a present."

I grin. “I do love presents. Hopefully, it isn’t one of those easy to take apart ones. I’ve been quite bored recently. I’m glad to hear they’re taking my offer seriously, especially since Benjamin so foolishly decided to challenge me. I do hope they’ve prepared him for what’s to come, though.” Or not... Breaking people is always my favorite activity.

“I’ll send Joel to help coordinate with Sinclair and see who picked up Ricci and his people. The only good thing about this is that we’ll have more test dummies for my new trainees.”

Hollis chuckles. “That’s one way to put it. We have two sales coming this week, but Roman wants to delay them as well. Petrov won’t argue, he’ll want to keep his people out of our shit. But the gang won’t wait.”

“Fuck, I know. Let me and Carter handle that—have him call me once he’s done with the dealers.”

“I’m not your secretary. I have my own job. It just happened to overlap with yours, and Roman asked if I could pass his message about the present along. Roman is going to contact Petrov about his order, and I’ll see if I can’t get the gang to at least wait a few extra days.”

I doubt he’ll be successful, but it’ll be appreciated. Unfortunately, while we hold the majority market—outside of the Martellis—for the best weapons, thanks to our deal with the Brazilians, the people we sell to aren’t too forgiving or understanding when shit that’s out of our control pops up. Especially those we sell to who aren’t in the immediate vicinity of said shit.

“Thanks, Hol.”

“Uh-huh. I’ll call with updates.” He hangs up and I grip my phone hard enough that

the case digs into my palm.

Looking to Joel, I tell him, “I need you to get in touch with Sinclair. See if he needs anything from you, then grab whoever we can spare and go hunting for cops who don't know their fucking place.”

“Another raid?”

I shake my head, then turn to Jude as I say, “You know how our dealers and drug runners are structured.” It wasn't a question, but he nods anyway, and I continue. “One of our top people—Giulio Ricci—got picked up with a few of his dealers. I'd have preferred a raid because those charges would have been easier to skirt. Possession with the intent to distribute will make this ugly.

“Anyone else, we'd be okay to let them cool their heels for a bit. But Ricci holds our largest territory; it's the equivalent to two of what other dealers hold. Which means he has more runners and people under him. More clients means more drugs in his possession as well.”

“Fuck,” Jude says. “Re-supply from us isn't for a few more days, but his reserves would be for those who have greater demand in-between the official distribution night.”

I nod in agreement. “And with the uptick in demand, I'm not surprised his guys needed a top-up. His territory is large, and has the steadiest climb in new clients compared to others.

“The fallout if Ricci isn't in place when those clients need their next fix won't be contained to just his territory. If we can't get our product to our people, and then to the clients, we'll lose all credibility.” Which is what our enemy wants.

“Not to mention the power vacuum left behind in Ricci’s territory. It being as large as it is will be coveted by others. We can't just pluck some rando into his place, but also can't risk a civil war as someone tries to take what isn't theirs.”

“Correct.” I give Jude a quick smile. “Not just a pretty face, Agnellino.” That earns me an unimpressed look, but I just grin... Something akin to pride? is coursing through me at how well Jude is stepping up so far, though the real tests have yet to begin.

“I’m off,” Joel says, dragging my attention away from my Little Lamb. “I just got the names of the arresting officers, and have tasked Leandro with finding out who the “anonymous tipper” was.”

I snort. “Really? That’s the justification they're going with? Some ‘Good Samaritan’ calling about shady dealings?”

Joel shrugs and gestures to his phone. “That's all Sinclair has so far, at least.”

Sighing, I wave him off. “Go, have fun. Just save a few for me.”

“Yes, sir,” Joel says around a twisted smile.

The bodyguard leaves and I turn to Jude. “This doesn’t get you out of training.”

“Shouldn’t it? Shit is going down, I don’t have time to entertain your fuckery if I'm going to support Roman.”

Moving quickly, I step in closer to Jude, pressing a knife against his side as I squeeze his arm and pull him into me. “You can’t support Roman if you're dead. My job is to not only prepare you for your new role, but to make sure you keep breathing.

“Right now, we’ve done our part, we have the correct people for each task in place. You and Benjamin had your first trial by fire experience. Now, it’s time to test you.”

He doesn't show fear. Instead, the fucker huffs, and the corner of his mouth quirks up. “Still think the Martellis will let you play with him? After everything both Families are dealing with?”

“Oh, they will. If he knows what’s good for him, Benjamin won’t go back on his word.” No, the fierce loyalty the younger man has for Emilio will guide him straight to me, because we all know I’m his best shot at becoming what he needs to be.



## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:05 am*

“Find a maid, or even the fucking chef. I need someone to watch Cole,” I instruct Benjamin, after an hour of having much-needed time with my adopted nephew. Thankfully, he’s already tuckered out and taking a nap from being rudely awakened in the middle of the night.

When Benjamin slips out of the room we have set up for Cole, I drop my head and try to pull myself together. We’re being targeted—and how the fuck am I supposed to be as good as my Master at this? I feel like there hasn’t been enough time to learn this shit. Hell, Roman has fucking years on me. He grew up with it. The pain echoing in my heart tells me there would never be enough time. Not when I’ve lost my center, my entire reason for being.

A maid slips in quietly and curtsies to me, which is fucking bizarre as hell. They didn’t do this shit to Master. Whatever. I stand up from the rocking chair and let her sit down. I stride out of the room, meeting Benjamin in the hallway. Neither of us say a word until we get to Master’s office.

“Status report?”

“Jenna is still working on getting our men out. Keegan is waiting to find out if he needs to wake up a judge, but Jenna doesn’t think so. We pay her enough that she should be able to handle this. Then again, we paid the cops, too.” Benjamin cringes as he meets my blank stare. The energy pulsing around me feels like a hurricane, and there’s nothing I can do to stop it—not that I’ve tried. My fury is too high to give a shit.

“What about Marcus?” I snap out, only to be interrupted by a ping from Benjamin’s

phone. I growl at it wordlessly, not needing any more distractions.

“Uh, good news on that front. Kind of. He found the cop. And the judge. But there’s bad news. Both are personally on the payroll.” I raise my eyebrows at that. Something is dead wrong.

“We can’t do shit about a judge. Not right now. It’s too dangerous if people we’re paying are coming after us. The cop though... I’m sure we can figure out a way to redirect suspicion there. Tell Marcus to pick him up.” I glance at my watch, pleased that Marcus made it within the two-hour mark. I may hate being the Boss, but at least I know how to encourage the other Boys.

Benjamin looks like he’s about to say something. The hesitation pisses me off, but finally, he nods and messages Marcus back. It doesn’t take long before a response rolls through. “Where do you want them to take the cop? Back here?”

“Hmm...one second.” I grab the desk phone and dial a number I’m way too familiar with now.

“Do you have any news?” Roman answers. Neither of us need greetings anymore, not with this shitstorm.

“I have the cop who signed off. We know who the judge was as well. Both were on our personal payroll. Marcus is picking up the cop. I had a thought... Would Tennant like to use him for training? I’ll send Benjamin your way with Marcus and our captive.”

Roman goes silent, and I can only imagine he’s checking in with his people. I glance at Benjamin while I wait for an answer. His eyes are wide and his jaw drops. I’m sure he didn’t expect me to drop him in the deep end like that, but fuck knows this is the best time to do it. Not to mention, Tennant is one of the most skilled interrogators I

know. Perhaps even the best, as right now, my own emotions are too close to the surface.

“ We’ll take him. Tennant likes presents. Send them our way. A word of warning... Tell Benjamin, Tennant won’t take it easy on him, even as an ally. He’ll likely hit harder because of it. ”

Grunting my understanding, I agree with the philosophy. “Thank you. Please make sure Tennant doesn’t kill my Second, and I’d prefer him to not lose any appendages.”

Roman just laughs before the phone is disconnected. Twisting my lips into what I hope is a smile, I try to encourage Benjamin. From the way he tenses, I’m certain I’ve failed. Neither of us say anything until Marcus arrives.

When he steps into the doorway, exhaustion is etched all over his body. His hair is in disarray, as if he’s run his hands through it repeatedly. Everything about him screams frustration. I know I pushed him hard, but we needed the answers.

“I have him. He’s wrapped up tight in the back of my SUV. What did you decide to do with him? Should I drag him in?”

Shaking my head, I gesture to Benjamin. “No. With the police breaking rules, I don’t want him here. Not to mention, I think it’s best to use him as a learning experience. You’ll be heading to the Amato’s. Tennant will take the cop for practice with Benjamin. I’m sure advanced interrogation techniques will be fun, if nothing else.”

My attempt at joy falls flat with Benjamin, but I shrug. Sometimes things need to be done. Learning violence is always necessary—and fun. Hopefully, Benjamin can make it out without any injuries. From Roman’s warning...that does not sound likely.

I wave both of them off. Benjamin stands up and follows Marcus out without a word.

I cringe, knowing I'm going to hear all about this from my best friend later.

I swivel around and stare at the Family motto. I'll make Master proud. After all, it's Courage. Loyalty. Victory. Benjamin has the loyalty, now he needs to find the courage to cut his enemies down. If Tennant can give him that? I'll thank him.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:05 am*

My curious nature has always been my downfall. It's how I found myself entangled with the Amatos in the first place, though never did I expect it to lead me here. Everything I've been through, all the pain and suffering, the permanent damage to my body, and it is Roman's belief in me that has me stumbling.

I won't let him down. He's given me far more than I could ever repay him for, and there's nothing in this world that would have me disappointing him. But that doesn't mean I don't question his mental state.

Nevertheless, here I am in one of Tennant's favorite torture chambers, waiting for Benjamin and Marcus Martelli to be escorted here, along with their "present" to Ten.

"Sit, Agnellino," Tennant says, pointing to a chair near the far edge of the room.

"I'm fine."

"It wasn't a suggestion, Jude. It's going to be a long day. I'm going to put both of you through your paces. Ideally, I'd test you both physically before we got to this part of the curriculum, but I can't say I'm disappointed by the change; it's refreshing. Now, it's just you and me, so sit. There will be plenty of time to prove yourself and your strength later. Besides," he grins, "if anyone dares question your resilience, I will be happy to put them in their place."

Arguing with him is futile, especially when I know he's just trying to look out for me. Sometimes, it's hard to remember that I'm not on my own anymore, that other people are around who care for my well-being.

I hate admitting my limitations. Being deaf has never bothered me, not really. It'd be pointless to gripe about something I was born with, but thanks to my bitch of a mother trying to kill me, I will never be able to walk the same again.

Jayden's insistence and continued work with me has given back much of my range of motion and strength, but it's not the same, and admitting that is a hard pill to swallow. Especially when the Family is now counting on me to survive my trials with Tennant, and stand by Roman's side.

I refuse to look weak in front of the Martellis, especially when one of them has already gone out of their way to insult me. As much as I hate Tennant stepping in, I'm glad he did—not that I'll ever tell him that. After a lifetime of being othered, and treated like shit by my family, my tolerance for such things is at an all-time low. I would have hated to kill the bastard and make things worse for Roman, especially when he has so many more important things to worry about right now.

Tennant's wave in my peripheral gets my attention, and I look over at him. "They're here," he says, brandishing his phone.

Standing, I make my way over to him. "How do you want to play this?"

His grin is slightly unhinged. "I am going to break you, Agnellino."

"I'm ready."

He laughs a little. "I hope so."

He opens the door and makes a detour to the bathroom, before leading the way to the main room of the warehouse, where Enzo is waiting with Marcus, Benjamin, and their offering.

“Was the escort really necessary? Either you trust us or you don’t,” Marcus says when we appear.

Tennant shrugs casually. “There are some things that are on a need-to-know basis. You’re lucky you’re here at all, I could have just as easily sent an escort for Benjamin only.”

Marcus snorts. “Yeah, right. I would have liked to see that.”

“Next time,” Tennant muses. “It’ll be fun.”

“Uhh, or not,” Benjamin says. “I don’t think Lio or Ignacio will be happy if you do that. Not to mention, Il Padrone will be back by then—hopefully—so, unless you have a death wish, bad idea.”

Tennant grins. “Oh, did you think this was a one-time offer? No, you’re mine now, or, at least, you will be. And until I release you, you do what I say, when I say it. Understand?”

“That’s not what we agreed to,” Marcus snarls.

“Did I forget to send the fingerprint?” Tennant asks in a cheerful voice. “You signed up for this, which means it’s my rules. And if I want to kidnap you from your home for a while...there’s nothing anyone can do about it.”

“We’ll leave.” Marcus takes a step forward, to put himself in front of Benjamin.

“No.” Benjamin grabs Marcus’s arm and pulls him back. “He’s right. I asked for this.” Benjamin raises his chin and looks straight at Tennant. “Do your worst.” He gives a pain-filled smile. “I’ve already been through hell and back for my Family. Anything you throw at me will pale in comparison to that.”

Tennant laughs while I watch Benjamin in fascination. His lack of fear is...reckless. The way his cheeks tinge pink, and the quick breaths he takes, tells me he's not as fearless as he wants to appear, but any challenge thrown at Ten is going to be taken; either he doesn't realize that, or he's so desperate to prove himself, he doesn't care. No matter the answer, all it will do is end up with him broken and bleeding.

"We'll see about that." Tennant tosses the bag he retrieved from the bathroom at Benjamin. "I'm glad you wore your makeup, good to know you're not completely hopeless. Now, remove it."

"Excuse me? You can't be serious."

"I am always serious, Benjamin," Tennant says, just low enough that I can barely hear him. "This is what you agreed to. I told you, I'm going to break you, and strip you of everything that makes you you."

"This is uncalled for!" Marcus protests.

"You're no longer needed here," Tennant tells him. "Enzo will escort you back, and he will work with you and Carter on the best ways to utilize our forces, so we're not spread too thinly."

"I think I'd better stay," he replies.

"No," Tennant says calmly. "You won't. You have a job to do, and that doesn't involve being here. Benjamin is in good hands. I would hate to tell your Boss you're being uncooperative."

"It's fine, Marcus. I got this. I'm not afraid of him."

Marcus looks at Benjamin, and says something too low for me to hear, but he



gestures to the bag in Benjamin's hand, so I can guess. They exchange quiet words for a moment before Marcus turns back to shoot daggers at Tennant.

"The Boss said no permanent damage..."

"I agreed not to kill him. How bloody he ends up will be up to him and how well he can listen."

"Are you sure about this?" Marcus asks one last time.

"Do as you're told, Marcus," Benjamin says in a firm voice, the order clear.

"Yes, boss," Marcus grits out, bowing to Benjamin's authority over him. "Call me if you need anything."

"It'll be fine."

Marcus looks dubious, but he allows Enzo to escort him out of the warehouse. Once he's gone, Tennant calls for one of the guards from the outside to drag his newest toy off to the torture room he prepped earlier.

"Now," Tennant says. "Are you going to do as you were told, or will our first lesson start here?"

"Do you know how long it takes to get makeup this flawless? And you want me to just wipe it off all willy-nilly? Because you said so? How is that okay? I came here for your so-called "training", not to be degraded like this."

Tennant moves closer to Benjamin, and he holds his ground, lifting his chin in defiance. "That's exactly what I want," Ten says. "I am glad you put the makeup on, this would have been far more painful for you if you went without, but now you're

here, and you're mine. I will make you into the perfect little soldier, and to do that, I will first strip you of everything that makes you unique. Make no mistake, you will be mine , and once you are... I will show you how to rebuild yourself into something even your own Family members are afraid of."

"And if I don't?"

I move in closer, so as to not miss a word of what Tennant has to say. Ten looks at me, the smile on his face is pure mayhem. "Then I will enjoy ruining you. Your choice, Topolino."

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:05 am*

I quickly wipe off my makeup, grimacing while I do. It's fucking unfair, but Marcus's whispered warning still rings in my ear. If Tennant thinks he can break me, he has another thing coming. What he doesn't realize? I bend, not break. He wonders if I'll learn quickly? Fuck, I wonder if he will.

Slipping back into the room where Tennant and Jude are in, I stand quietly, waiting for their attention. When Tennant finally graces me with a smirk—bordering on evil—I realize he's known I was here the entire time. The fucker has the audacity to wink at me. At least Jude is startled by my quiet appearance.

“As a Second, sometimes you want your presence to fill up the room. Other times, you want to be a silent shadow. We'll work on it. Both of you need practice.” Tennant taps his lips as he peruses us both. My skin flushes at the embarrassment of failing already. Tennant cocks his head, studying me, and I know I need to redirect him.

“Do you have plans for today's lessons?” I ask respectfully. I'm trying the respectful route first, but fuck if he doesn't make me want to piss him off. I'm not sure why, but I want to see that cold facade crumble, even if it means standing in the middle of a tornado. Only my promise to Lio and Ignacio keeps me in check—for now.

“How much experience do you have with interrogations?” Tennant's gaze is penetrating, and it takes me a moment to swallow, and to remember he asked a question.

“I've been in the room when Lio has interrogated others. I've only participated once myself.”

“And what did you do?” Tennant keeps his sole focus on me, even though I glance at Jude. I know he’s not going to like this answer.

“Ignacio taught me how to skin someone.” I clench my teeth, rolling my shoulders back. I may not be as experienced as Tennant, or any of the Amatos or Martellis, but that doesn’t mean shit. I’m here.

“Hmm...what type of knife?” Tennant picks up our gift from where his men left him in the middle of this torture room and shoves him into a chair, locking him down easily.

“Uh, well...we didn’t have much time, and Ignacio felt using a skinning tool would be best.”

Tennant freezes for a moment, before turning to look at me. He sneers in disgust, shaking his head. “What the fuck do they teach you over there? No wonder Lio wants me to train you. That’s just fucking sad.”

“Then do better,” I snap, stepping forward. I’m still giving him plenty of space, but fuck if I don’t want to intrude, to make him step back for once.

Snorting, he shakes his head. “You’ve got balls, kid. But you’re not ready to take me on. Now, it seems today’s lesson is going to be about interrogation. You certainly need it, Topolino.”

He shoos me away and I move to stand next to Jude. I bite back the curses that want to fall from my tongue. I regret promising not to piss off our allies.

Tennant rips off the duct tape from the cop’s mouth, and I smile at the scream of pain. Perhaps this lesson will be more fun than I imagined.

Once the screams die down, the cop sneers at us. “You’re going to want to release me. Immediately. Maybe if you do, you won’t go away for too long. Right now, you’ve fucked yourself. You can’t just take a cop. If we go missing, the entire wrath of the blue line will rain down. And you’re already in enough shit.”

“Oh, really? The men in blue. They terrify me so much... Actually, why do they call it the men in blue? You have more than men in it...”

Tennant slides his gaze to me, as if I’d understand misogyny or bigotry. At my shrug, he once again focuses on the man in front of him, the threat doing nothing but amusing him, given his jovial tone.

“Now, let’s be clear here. I don’t give a fuck that you’re a cop. If anything, that just makes my day even better. What I want to know is why, after years of taking bribes, you decide to turn on the hand that feeds you? I don’t expect people to be smart, but a little common sense isn’t much to ask for, is it?”

The man doesn’t say a word, gritting his teeth as if that’s enough to defeat Tennant’s will. Fucking idiot. Tennant gestures for me to come forward and I quickly listen, lest I piss him off. I take the knife he silently hands me and look at him sideways. “Yes?”

“Skinning lesson. You’re going to make a small nick here,” he places his fingers just under his elbow and makes a downwards motion. “Then slowly peel the skin back with the knife. Think of it like taking the skin off an apple. That’s all you’re doing.”

“Except the apple in this case will be screaming,” I retort sardonically as I meet the cop’s gaze.

“Just think of it as music. It’s quite relaxing.”

I shrug a shoulder as I side-eye him. Drawing a deep breath, I follow his directions,

chanting in my head that I can do this. He stops me occasionally when I go too deep, and I lose myself to his tutoring. I almost miss the cop's babbling until Tennant grips my shoulder tightly. Fuck, that's going to hurt. His lips twitch as I switch my attention over to him.

"Yes?" I ask as the sounds of the room finally penetrate my bubble of violence.

"While torture is fun, you do need to pay attention. After all, we're trying to find out answers, not just carve a man up."

Sighing, I stand and roll my shoulders, trying to release the tension from being slumped over, since I had concentrated on his arms first.

"What the fuck is wrong with you people?" the man whimpers. I huff at his pitiful response, and gesture for him to get the fuck on with talking, otherwise I want to go back to training. "I know it's open season on both of your organizations. It doesn't matter what you bribe us with, or what you threaten us with, we will take you down. You've already lost your Kings. We'll dismantle the rest of your organizations piece by piece. And I can't fucking wait. We'll finally be getting rid of the crime on the streets."

I startle at Jude's laughter, and glance back. So far, he's been a silent observer, likely having been through these beginner lessons already. "You think you'll get rid of the crime on the streets by doing away with us? Who do you think keeps the gangs, cartels, and other organizations out of here?"

"You are correct, Agnellino," Tennant purrs as he gestures for his lover to come closer. Jude stands up and walks forward. With silent instructions, I hand Jude the knife I had been using and step back. "It's your turn to see what you can get out of this coward."

I stand back to watch Jude. Admittedly, his technique is far superior to mine. I wonder if he's done this before. It doesn't take long before the cop hisses, his entire body shaking.

"Fuck! There's nothing more I can tell you! We were told that it's time to take both organizations out, that we're protected now. Several of us received a letter, and the person knew we were being fucked over, had threats made against us, or were forced to take bribes."

"And do you have a copy of these letters?" Tennant asks in a flat voice.

"Are you fucking crazy? No. We all got rid of them and decided to attack—legally."

Snorting, I shake my head. "You didn't do shit legally. Go ahead and have your last thought of self-righteous bullshit, but you took money without a care. We didn't threaten you into doing it. And now you're likely bribing others to put a target on our back. But, guess what? It won't work. You're done here."

Tennant hands me a different knife and nods towards the cop. I didn't ask his name, and I don't fucking care. With a quick slash to his throat, the problem is gone.

My hands shake, and I almost drop the knife. Thankfully, Tennant is there to take it. He pushes me back until I stumble into a seat, adrenaline coursing through me. It may have been the right move, but killing still doesn't come easy to me. It's only the second time I've done it.

"You'll get used to it, Topolino—or die." Tennant doesn't sound particularly bothered by this, and I swallow hard at the reminder that he really wouldn't care if I died. I wish I could say it terrified me, and it does in some ways, but it's more captivating than anything.

“Are we finished?” I croak out, ready to take a shower, if nothing else.

“No, I think we have time for one more lesson. Go ahead and sit back down, Jude. You saw me put the cop in the chair, but I don’t think you saw the knots I used. Let me grab some rope. I want you to get a feel for it. You need to be able to replicate it.”

My heart thumps with worry. I’m not sure what’s going to happen, but there’s something about the way Tennant smiles that sets me on edge. He disappears for a short while, before coming back with several lengths of rope. He goes to Jude first, explaining the knot as he does. He steps back and nods before turning toward me.

“Umm. Shouldn’t you untie Jude first?” I ask nervously, but Tennant doesn’t say a word. Instead, he kneels in front of me, taking the same time to explain a slightly different knot to me. I’d be fascinated if I wasn’t so worried.

When he stands, he smiles at the two of us and heads out, turning the lights off and plunging us into darkness. Fuck. Okay, well...he can’t leave us for long, right?

“Uh, Jude? He wouldn’t really leave us, would he?”

“You have a lot to learn about Tennant,” Jude responds grimly. “He really does want to break us. Tying us up is a lesson, which means we’ll be here for however long he deems necessary—and that could be a while.”

“Aren’t you lovers, though? He’d at least want to take mercy on you, yes?” I can’t see Jude in the dark, but I orientate my head in his direction as best as possible.

“How often did Il Padrone take mercy on Lio?” Jude drawls, and I wince, because yeah, my friend went through some fucking shit there.

“Great. Well, I guess we’ll just hang out. You, me, and a dead body.” For some



reason, Jude finds that funny. Personally? I'd rather think of ways I can make Tennant pay. I don't give a shit that he's supposed to be the best. Everyone loses at some point...

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:05 am*

“What are you doing here?” I ask Roman, shutting the door to the security room firmly behind me.

“I’m here to watch the show, obviously.” He gestures to the monitors showing Jude and Benjamin’s current predicament. The high-tech cameras that Hollis installed are easily able to show a clear image, even in the dark.

Jude explains to Benjamin that they’ll be there as long as I deem necessary—or for as long as it takes for them to work their way out of the rope. My Little Lamb doesn’t tell Benjamin the last part, of course. If Benjamin’s not smart enough to work it out on his own, or to figure out that while I’ve tied them up efficiently, but not as much as I could have, to prevent them from escaping, then it’s not my problem.

I’m here to teach them, not to hold their hand through every little thing. My new toy will learn quickly, or this will be very painful for him. The fact that no blood was spilled today—his, at least—was mainly pure luck, not because he impressed me.

“I can work from here,” Roman says. He gestures to the laptop and phone resting on the desk. “The house was getting too stifling, so I asked Benji to bring me; Carter approved it.”

There’s resentment in Roman’s tone over that, but I ignore it. He might be the Boss, but there are protocols in place to keep him protected. No one is allowed to override my orders—not even Cristian—when it comes to safety, but it’d be remiss of us to not have a safety measure in place.

I might not agree with Carter’s decision, but I trust him to look after his son, so I

won't give him too much shit for allowing Roman to run around town.

"How much did you see?" I ask.

Roman shrugs. "Enough to know we have a problem, a big one." He chews his lip for a moment, his dark green eyes are wide and full of pain. "I think we've gone about this all wrong."

"What do you mean?" Leaning my hip against the desk, I keep my eyes on the monitors, watching as Jude tries to struggle free of the rope, before realizing I didn't leave them loose, just not impossible to escape from.

"Hollis is trying to track down whoever thought it'd be a good idea to fuck with us, right?"

"Yes. They clearly have more resources available than we expected, if they're able to bribe our own people against us. Cops not on our payrolls? Fine. They can be easily bought off, but this guy is either holding something over their heads, or his pockets are really deep."

"That's what I'm saying. It doesn't make sense. Especially when it's both of our Families in the crosshairs. You're telling me they have the money and reach to pay everyone off? I don't think so. But..." He pauses for emphasis, worry filling his eyes. "Who would cops go out of their way for? Who could get them to turn against us, despite the money and other bonds we've created?"

Fucking hell. "It's another member of law enforcement..." I muse.

Roman nods. "It's something we'll have to take into consideration. Now, that would make a lot of sense. It doesn't explain everything, because we pay our men really fucking well, and despite how the dumbass in there," he nods to the monitor, "tried to

act, dirty cops are dirty cops. None of them would have taken the money had they really been upstanding citizens. Hell, I can name five people off the top of my head who were cops and ended up turning around to work for us.”

So could I. Protect and Serve may be the motto of most police departments, but they’re still human. And humans, inherently, are selfish. Sure, you get the occasional do-gooder who gets a bee in their bonnet about getting rid of us “criminals,” but as Jude pointed out, we are the ones standing in the way of the truly bad people.

We might sell weapons and drugs, but that’s because we’re businesspeople. Everyone has to feed their family in some way; trafficking is ours. While the drugs mainly go to the lovely citizens in our territories, we sell to some gangs as well. The weapons we get from the Brazilian cartel are hot-off-the-line—literally—and are coveted by many.

And it’s not just the gangs and other organizations that buy the weapons either. I know for a fact that we’ve had precious “officers of the law” buying our guns. Because they very much need not-legal-because-they-technically-don’t-exist assault weapons to do their jobs. Right.

“Have you told Hollis your theories? It won’t change much, since we don’t know who we’re dealing with, but it will help narrow down the scope of investigation.”

“I texted him while you were tying your new playthings up. He responded with a lot of cursing. Pretty sure he’s been taking Russian lessons from the trips, because I didn’t recognize some of the words.”

I snort. I am not surprised. Everyone’s taken to the newest additions because, as sweet and innocent looking as they are, they’re also batshit crazy. Perfect fit for the Family, really.

“We can get together and discuss the theory with the Martellis—later. Right now, I’m teaching.”

Roman laughs. “How long are you going to keep them in there?”

“Until they either prove they’re not completely useless, or I get bored. Whichever comes first.”

He sighs and shakes his head, but lets it go. He knows there are methods to my madness, having been on the receiving end of them—is still on the receiving end. His training isn’t done, just paused while we get Cristian back. Honestly, at this point, him getting his ass kidnapped is inconvenient. I have shit to do. I don’t have time to be babysitting untrained and underprepared Martellis—no matter how cute they are when they try to stand up to me.

I watch the monitor for a long while, as Roman runs the Family from his phone, and with each second that passes by, the need to do something rushes over me. There’s only so long before I can hold my true nature back; the one that emerged when I was fifteen and brutally killed two men who were double my size.

It’s easy to contain the bloodlust when someone is holding the leash... Too bad the only one strong—or dumb—enough is currently fucking kidnapped .

“What do you think of Benjamin?” I ask Roman.

He snorts. “He hates me, but I admire him. He somehow got Lio under his thumb, and anyone who can manage that is someone to watch. He’s loyal, maybe a little too loyal, and clearly doesn’t think before he speaks.” Roman looks up at me. “But, he’s willing to challenge you and not care about the consequences. I don’t know if that makes him stupid or just reckless.”

“Maybe a little of both,” I muse. “Emilio made a good choice. If he survives, he’ll serve his Family well. He is...amusing. A kitten trying to stand up to a lion, but there’s a fine line between humoring his bravado and killing him for his disrespect. For your sake, and your friendship with Emilio, I hope he learns quickly.”

I wouldn't mind shedding some of Benjamin's blood, he needs a little bit of a wakeup call, but I'd rather not kill him. I will, if I have to, there would be no guilt or remorse, but I meant what I said; I'd hate to damage Roman's relationship with Emilio. He needs someone who understands him. Leandro doesn't count, mainly as I'm not convinced Leandro actually likes Roman. So, I'll train the boy, and it can be my wedding gift to Ignacio, even though he doesn't deserve it.

“Ignacio has done him a disservice though, by not getting him up to speed quicker.”

“They’ve been just as busy as we have. I’m sure it’s on Il Padrone’s never-ending list of things to do.”

I hum in disgust. “Not good enough. If Ignacio wants to keep him alive, he should have started his training much, much earlier. I want to take him down a few pegs, for being such a neglectful partner.

“Benjamin can be molded, the potential is there, even if he’s proving to not be an easy student. He’s not a natural, but there’s a fire burning in him. A need to prove himself, and to see his family safe; it’ll serve him well, if I can pull it out of him.”

Roman grins. “If anyone can do it, it’s you.”

“Your faith in me is biased, Little Prince.”

He scoffs. “Please. You’ve done good work with Jude and Hollis. You’re the best for a reason, Ten. The Martellis recognize that, even if they don’t agree with your

methods.”

“Do you agree with my methods, Little Prince?”

“Not at all, but I know they’re necessary.”

Reaching for him, I grab his hair and tug, pulling him toward me. He winces but doesn’t complain, allowing me to drag him around.

“Do you think I care?” I ask lowly.

His breath catches and he licks his lip, his eyes darkening as his cheeks flush. “No,” he whispers. “I know you don’t.”

Leaning down, I ghost my lips across his. “And you like that , don’t you? You like when I don’t care about you or your feelings.”

He moans and I grin, my cock waking up, along with the urges that tell me to wreck this boy. Tightening my grip in his hair, I pull until he’s forced to stand from the chair in order to ease the pain and tugging on his scalp.

Roman tries to reach for me, but I hold him away, twisting my fingers in his hair, and forcing a beautiful cry from his throat.

“No touching, this isn’t about you.” His breath stutters and he blinks away tears. “Such a beautiful giocattolo,” I murmur, relishing in his responses.

“Please,” he gasps.

“Please, what, Toy?”

“Use me.”

With my free hand, I grab his hip and flip him over the desk, shoving him face down into the wood. “Don’t say anything you don’t mean, Giocattolo. I will take full advantage.”

Roman gasps and tries to thrust his hips back. Using my hand in his hair, I force him further down onto the desk. His hands scramble for purchase, and he can’t seem to decide if he wants to escape or push for more.

This is what I need. I need my Toy to fight, to offer up everything we both want, but make us work for it at the same time. Benjamin’s barely concealed disrespect has had me on edge all this time, and getting to use Roman will help quell some of that need.

Roman’s skirt has a zipper in the back, and I don’t have any problem undoing it, shoving the fabric down his legs. Like always, when he’s wearing tight clothing, he’s sans underwear, baring his beautiful ass to me.

“Do you want me to fuck you, Little Prince?” I ask, holding him down with one hand, while using my free one to trace along his hole.

He bucks, and I release his hair to grip the back of his neck, digging my fingers into his skin. “I think I’m going to fuck you just like this,” I tell him. “You look so good while at my mercy. How can I pass up such an opportunity?”

Spitting onto my fingers, I rub the barely-there slick around his hole, letting him feel every inch as I roughly push two in. He moans at the sudden intrusion, but doesn’t protest. I don’t bother opening him up, I’m just getting his channel a little wet.

“I’m going to force you open on my cock, and you’re not allowed to come.”



He whines, trying to shift away from me, but I hold him firmly. “No,” I muse. “I’m going to use you for my pleasure, without giving you anything, and you’re going to take it like the good toy you are. Maybe I’ll let Jude fuck my cum out of you as his reward for passing my test.” Roman tries to lift his head to glance at the monitor, but I yank my fingers from him and replace them with my cock.

He shouts at the sudden intrusion as I force my dick halfway in. It’s tight, dry, and not pleasurable for either of us, but the feel of him contracting around my length has me hardening further. The stimulation trips the too much sensation button and leads into pleasure.

“Your focus should be on me,” I hiss through clenched teeth. “Nobody else matters, unless I allow them to. For that little stunt, I’ll tell Hollis you’re not allowed to come until I say so.”

He chokes on a sob but I ignore him, pulling out before shoving back in. The friction makes it more intense, but the pleasure from being in such a warm hole overrides everything else.

Roman is too far gone to realize when I reach into a drawer and remove a small tube of lube. The next time I pull out, I use just enough lubrication to make the glide in easier—for me. He doesn’t deserve such courtesies.

My Giocattolo takes everything I give him, even as he cries and writhes, his hands scraping against the wooden desk. Watching my cock fuck in and out of him, how easily he opens for me, even when it hurts, when I don’t give him even a moment to catch his breath... It’s a heady feeling that has my dick thickening further, and I release my hold on Roman’s neck to grip his hips in both hands.

He doesn’t dare move, whether that’s because he’s too fucked out, or has learned his lesson for now, it doesn’t matter. It leaves me with nothing but opportunity to fuck

him harder into the desk. I'm sure the edge is cutting into his skin, but he doesn't protest. I do love when he gives up the fight and just takes it.

This delicate boy is so strong—even though he doesn't believe it—that taking him apart piece by piece is an honor, one very few of us have. Holding him bruisingly tight, I thrust in a few more times before pressing deep and coming inside him.

He's shaking and gasping as I stay still, savoring the feel of his ass contracting around me. Letting go of him, I reach around and touch a finger to his slick cockhead, swirling the sticky pre-cum around.

Roman moans. "Please..."

"No."

I pull my hand away and then slowly remove my dick. He whines and reaches a hand back, as if to keep me inside him, but we, sadly, have other things to do.

"Are you okay, Little Prince?"

He lets out a watery laugh. "You fucked me over a desk and didn't let me come, what do you think?"

"If you can give me attitude, you're fine."

He snorts and then groans as he tries to push himself up by planting both hands on the desk.

Carefully, I place my hands back on his hips and help him to stand, holding onto him for a moment to make sure he doesn't fall over.

“Just give me a minute to catch my breath,” he says.

“Take all the time you need.” I help him back into his skirt, smirking at how his still-hard cock looks in the tight fabric.

“I regret wearing this suit,” he grouses.

“It looks good on you.” I adjust his jacket and tie, the light yellow shirt paired with the royal blue pencil skirt and jacket compliments him well. Especially now that his cheeks are flushed a rosy red.

I lift his hand and examine his chipped nails. “Have Jude fix your polish later.”

Dark green eyes meet mine. “You’re usually telling me to take the polish off.”

“You’re the Boss, Roman. Right now, you need to look and feel the part; there will be plenty of opportunity to put you in your place once this is all over.”

“Yeah...” He looks and sounds so dejected, like he’s struggling to believe we’ll win this.

“None of that.” I lift his chin and force his gaze back to mine. “We are the Amatos, and they, whoever they are, will learn why it’s a bad idea to fuck with us. Cristian won’t die so easily. The fucker is extremely hard to kill; ask me how I know.”

Roman huffs a little and a smile tugs at his mouth. “Thank you, Ten.”

“You can thank me by doing your job, and making your father proud.”

He doesn’t look confident, but there’s a determination that enters his eyes that wasn’t there moments before. “Okay.”

“Now,” I nod to the monitor, “shall we go release them?”

Roman laughs. “Sure.”

I lead the way into the torture chamber and don’t give a warning before turning on the lights. Both Benjamin and Jude blink rapidly as their eyes adjust to the sudden brightness.

“I am very disappointed in you, Benjamin.”

“For what? Not dying after you left me here tied up?”

I tsk and nod to Jude, who’s sitting with his hands in his lap.

Benjamin gapes. “How the fuck did you get out?”

Jude holds up his thin knife. “You learn a lot by blending into the background and observing. I picked this trick up from Doc.” He slides the knife back into his sleeve. “The ropes weren’t meant to keep us here,” he says blandly. “Surely you realized that?”

Benjamin wiggles in his bonds, trying and failing to get loose. “I have fucking rope burn on my wrists and forearms from them sliding around.”

“Next time, pay closer attention,” I tell him mildly. “I told you exactly how to get out of them as I was tying you up.”

He glares at me yet doesn’t respond. Sighing, I release him, but press down on his shoulder so he stays sitting. Crouching down, I whisper, “You are so much better than this, Topolino. I am very disappointed.”

He swallows and tries to glare, but...there's something in those sea green eyes that I can't name. It's not the indignation he tries to hold onto, though.

He looks away, his cheeks flushing red. I let him, this time, not wanting to push him too far right now. I'd rather hold onto the pleasant sensations my rendezvous with Roman created, not ruin it with this interesting, but slightly clueless boy.

Benjamin scowls. "It's not nice to talk about people."

I look over to Roman and Jude, who stare back at Benjamin. Jude with amusement, while Roman frowns. "It's not nice to eavesdrop."

"Be nice, Little Prince. My topolino has had a long day already."

"Would you stop calling me that?" Benjamin asks. "It's not nice to call people names when they don't understand what you're saying, either."

Roman laughs and then signs, "Ignacio isn't going to like it when he hears you call his precious Little Mouse that."

I grin. "Ask if I care."

"That's...not ASL," Benjamin points out.

Roman rolls his eyes. "No shit. It's LIS—Italian Sign Language. Because American Sign isn't the only one out there."

"I know that."

Roman gives him a dubious look, but turns back to Jude and helps him out of his chair, picking his cane up off the floor, where it must have fallen while he tried to get

out of the rope.

“You can ride back with Roman, Agnellino. Benjamin will come with me.”

“I should call someone?—”

I cut him off. “Marcus is still working with Enzo and Carter, last I heard, and Roman needs to make a call to Emilio when we get back, so you will ride with me to save everyone time.”

He grits his teeth and glares, but gives a clipped nod anyway. Good. Maybe he can learn quickly, at least with some things.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:05 am*

I beat a staccato tempo against my leg with my fingers as I wait in the foyer of the Amato mansion. Keegan hovers behind me, uncomfortable in what he still considers a potential enemy's den. With the news he has, I can't blame him for already being on edge.

"Haven't you ever heard of a phone call? It's rude to just show up somewhere," Hollis asks when he enters the room.

There is something about Hollis that makes me want to poke him, to play with the fire I see in his eyes. Considering my skin vibrates with the need for Il Padrone to put me in my place, to give me that stress relief, it shouldn't surprise me that I'm more tempted by Hollis than the rest.

"I had hoped to speak to Roman in person. We have information to pass on, and I felt it prudent to not have the conversation over the phone."

Hollis stares at me, as if I'm nothing, and I have to suppress the shiver that wants to run down my spine. "Do you think I would ever let Roman, or anyone in our organization, use phones that are not secure?"

His soft voice belies the danger ahead, and I tilt my head in his direction. I steel myself as I meet his gaze. "No. I believe you excel at your job, and my apologies for doubting that. I meant only that it's easier to discuss some issues in person. Especially as I believe Keegan is necessary to the discussion."

I feel like a bug being dissected as Hollis examines me. He must find my apology acceptable as he waves us forward into a sitting room. I wait for him to sit first before

taking a spot across from him on a small loveseat. Keegan moves behind me, unwilling to sit next to me. I want to roll my eyes, but don't dare. This "protect the Boss" thing grates on my nerves. I'm used to doing the protecting, not being protected. Benjamin's long speech—more accurately, lecture—from earlier, reminds me I can't throw myself into things like I used to.

"They should be back shortly. What's this news?"

I briefly hesitate, wondering if I should wait for my counterpart. Then again, if I'm going to listen to Benjamin's advice about not pissing off our allies, and committing to making nice with Hollis, I may as well go ahead. He can always summarize for Roman if needed.

"Jenna—our lawyer—looked into the court system. Prosecutors, judges, hell, even criminal defense lawyers who take our cases to protect any men who do manage to get picked up. It's...bad. Her discreet questioning found that the cops aren't the only ones out for our blood."

Keegan follows up. "And this is where I come in. It's likely you're facing the same type of planning that I did in my old job." I can't see his face right now, but when he first ran this by me, all the blood had drained from his features.

"As an assassin, or an operative?" Hollis asks smugly as he leans back. It sets my teeth on edge, but I pull myself back.

Keegan snorts. "I'm not surprised you know my background. I've never hidden it. Back when I was still with law enforcement, we used to play these games. Find a weak spot and press on it. It only works when it's personal. And yes, that includes when my own team killed my lover.

"Vengeance...it's a hell of a motivator. We have someone from a law enforcement



background using all of their tools, and it has to be personal. Did they lose a loved one? A partner? Hell, maybe they just went batshit crazy and think it's personal. They most probably don't know who is pulling the strings, they just want us out of the way. I'd suspect few people would actually know who sits at the top though."

Hollis waves Keegan's words away. "Roman already figured out it was another LEO?—"

Jumping up, I cut him off, stalking toward him. "Why the fuck wasn't I informed? We could have already been investigating!"

Hollis's bored look enrages me. I lean forward and he calmly stands, not bothering to push me back. We're a hair's breadth away as he speaks. "It's a recent development. One he wanted to discuss in person. Had you waited for his next phone call, you would know this already. If you want to be patted on the head...at least you found out the court system is also infested, and confirmed with your lackey. Now, I suggest—strongly—that you back up. You will not like the consequences if you do not."

Hollis slips a knife out of the sheath at his hip, and I shudder. Fuck . I know Il Padrone accepts my need to use sex as a release. Hell, he taught me to do it. But would he have a problem with me going outside the Family? Right now, I want nothing more than to go to my knees and choke on Hollis's cock.

"And if I don't?" I croak out.

The dark chuckle from Hollis causes me to shudder as he presses the knife to my neck. My eyes plead for something I have no right to ask for. Not when he's already in a relationship. He has his own harem. Maybe that's why I want him. I'd never waver from Master, and with Hollis, I'd have no desire anyway. I don't want to reassure my Boys, I want to be controlled instead.

“Ah, I see, Cucciolo. You want what isn’t yours... You need something that no one else is capable of offering you... I can promise you—you’ll regret it.”

I croak out, “Never.”

Keegan hisses behind me, but doesn’t interrupt. At least he’s well trained. All I can do now is balance on a knife’s edge. Either way we go, it’ll change things. Hopefully, for the better...

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:05 am*

T his boy likes playing with fire . It's the only thing I can think as I trace along Emilio's throat with my knife. He doesn't even hint at going for his, though we both know he's better trained than I am.

No, he doesn't want to defend himself from me... He wants whatever I can give him, even if it means he gets a little roughed up.

Flicking my wrist, I let the tip of the blade penetrate his flesh, drawing blood. His emerald eyes darken, the shade a close match to Roman's own green. Keegan moves, like he's going to try to stop me, and I meet his steely gaze. His lips press into a line of displeasure, and I decide he's not a threat.

There are enough eyes on the security cameras, and Elias is right outside the room, so should he decide that he's going to make himself a nuisance, the guards will take care of it. Though, I have a feeling Emilio wouldn't take it well should his man decide to interrupt.

Not that there's anything to interrupt—not yet. The question is: Do I want there to be?

Simple answer: Yes, I want to put this boy on his knees and make him feel everything I have to offer. He only thinks he wants me to put him in his place... He has no idea what he's asking for. Or does he?

Il Padrone fell for him for a reason; he's not just a pretty face. That doesn't mean he knows exactly what he's getting himself into, though. Unless Roman decided to share how he gets used, and I wouldn't put it past our Giocattolo to share details. He earns

his bruises, and isn't ashamed of them, so I wouldn't be surprised to learn that he overshares with his friend.

I should probably feel upset about that, but it's amusing. Especially if that means Emilio thinks I'm the best person to give him what he needs. Which, I am. Either me or Tennant are the only ones capable of giving this volatile boy what he needs—possibly Jude, too, but I already know his answer, and like hell I'm going to allow Tennant to touch Emilio. At least, not unless I touch him first...

"Voglio vederti rovinato," I whisper, dragging my knife down his throat, leaving a trail of blood in its wake.

Emilio shudders, his breath catching in his throat as I pull my knife from his skin, but don't put it away.

"Do you think you've earned my cock, Cucciolo?"

Fire still dances in his eyes, not an ounce of his fury banked yet. Hmm. It seems I need to push him more.

I hum. "I bet I can make pretty sounds fall from your lips..." I tease one of his nipples through his shirt with my knife, drawing a breathless moan from his throat. "Strip, Cucciolo," I order, stepping back.

Emilio is quick to do as he's told, toeing out of his shoes and shucking his clothes off. He leaves them in a pile and I point my knife at them, forcing him to take a deep breath as he silently huffs but folds the clothing neatly. Much better.

We might be doing this because he asked, but we're doing it my way, and if he doesn't like it...well, he knows where the door is. "I want you kneeling on the floor, you can grip the cushions if you need to."

I'd prefer to not kneel for this, but if I get blood on the couch, the maids would kill me. I don't want to change location, though. Doing this in an office wouldn't be as comfortable, and I won't bring him upstairs to our bedroom. As reluctant as I am to bloody the couch, I don't want to do the same to a random bed either.

Kicking Emilio's legs apart, so I can kneel between them, I trace the spine of my knife across his shoulders, down his neck and back, to his pretty ass. Goosebumps erupt across his skin, and I like knowing I have such an effect on him.

I'm sure his Master has many, many unique and creative ways to hurt him, but that's more Tennant's scope of expertise than mine. If we had time, I'd put him in one of the rooms Ten and I have built over the years for our kidnapping games. A little mindfucking would do this boy good, but as it is, I have limited resources.

Flipping the knife in my hand, I run the edge up and down his back and sides, leaving scratches on his flesh, but not breaking the skin—until I do. Seeing the blood run from Emilio's shoulder down his back has my cock throbbing in my pants.

"I want to hear you, Cucciolo. How can I know you're getting what you need if you're as silent as a mouse?" Leaning in, I lick up the blood, enjoying the tangy copper taste on my tongue.

Emilio moans and his hands tighten on the cushions. "Better," I muse. "But not quite good enough. If you want this...show me."

Moving away a little to make more room, I adjust the grip on my knife, raise it up at the perfect angle, and slash it across his skin, watching as his pretty flesh breaks open and blood flows across his lower back.

He cries out, his head falling forward, and I use my free hand to play in his blood, rubbing it into his skin and down to his hole.

“That’s it,” I encourage. “I want you to hear how much you want it. Be a good puppy and beg .” I slice into the curve of his ass, the meaty flesh cutting open beautifully. He’ll need stitches, but it’s nothing Doc hasn’t seen before with the way Carter and Cristian play.

Setting the knife aside, I squeeze his ass, letting the blood run over my fingers as I use it to lube up his hole. The slick dries quickly, and is usually too sticky for my taste, but for putting Emilio in his place, it’s perfect.

Using two fingers, I stretch him quickly, not all that worried about his comfort, but not wanting to damage him either. I lean over him and whisper into his ear. “Do you want my cock, Cucciolo?”

He shudders, hesitating before finally nodding.

“I can’t hear you.”

“Yes!” he says firmly.

“You don’t deserve it,” I respond with a chuckle. At his whine, proving his nickname all over again, I whisper in his ear once more, “But you need it. I know that. You can’t get this from anyone else until your Master gets home. Until then, I’ll give you it. On my terms.”

Standing, I undo my belt before pulling it all the way off and placing it in easy reach. Emilio tries to move, looking over his shoulder at me. I kick him, nudging one of his thighs further out. “I didn’t say you could move... I was going to let you come, but if you can’t even stay still for more than a minute...”

“Please...”

I look over my shoulder at Keegan, who is still frozen in place, watching the scene unfold in front of him with grim intent, making sure every move I make won't permanently damage his precious stand-in Boss. I grin at him before turning back to my cucciolo.

And what a beautiful puppy he is, too. His smooth skin is ruined by the rivulets of red. If I had more time and patience, I'd string him up somewhere and work him over, making sure every inch of his skin is marked by me in some way. Alas, we don't have that kind of time. As I told Emilio, Roman and the others are on their way.

For a brief moment, I wonder what my lovers will think of this scene, except I frankly don't care. I'm sure both Roman and Jude will have questions, but I trust in our relationship enough to know they won't fault me for taking this from the boy in front of me, especially not when it was given up so freely. Tennant, well, he'll just be sad he missed it, and will probably bring the camera feed up to watch—most likely while fucking one of our boys.

Kicking off my shoes, I remove my pants and gather up more of Emilio's blood, using it to stroke my cock. It's not enough, so I spit in my palm, letting out a groan as I watch the body spread out before me shudder in pleasure.

I didn't plan on fucking him, but how can I pass up such a tempting offer? Especially since I don't fully believe his pathetic apology from earlier. I know how the Martellis are made—Allesandro trains them using sex—and while it's not my preferred method, I'm only human. Passing up a willing body isn't hard, but why should I?

Kneeling behind Emilio once more, I press my cock against his hole. He resists, the tight friction almost too much, but with some more spit and blood, we make it work. He lets out a sharp cry as I enter him, his head thrown back, mouth open and eyes closed. Gripping his light hair in one hand, I use it to anchor him in place as I slowly enter him, sliding in and out a few times to loosen him up.

It's rough, and not how I usually like to fuck, but it's also a very Tennant-type move, and I like that—channeling my lover so I can put this boy, who's not mine, in his place.

“This is where you belong,” I tell him, thrusting all the way inside. “You might be a Boss, but you're also a cockslut, aren't you?”

He refuses to respond, and I press against him harder. “Fuck!”

“You may not want to answer me, but you are. I don't know how your Master lets you do anything else, as you make such a wonderful cocksleeve.”

Pulling back, I grip his hips tightly. My movements have made the wounds on his ass and lower back bleed again, but I use that as extra lube and begin fucking him in earnest, pushing him against the couch and listening to his wonderful cries as I fuck into him.

It's a punishing fuck, there's no two ways about it. I barely give him time to breathe as I shove in and out of him, feeling his tight ass cling to me. Digging my nails into his skin, I hope I leave marks that will sting with every movement—as if the cuts I've littered his back with aren't enough. But it's not... Not when this boy has played a dangerous game for days now, putting not only his life but those of his Family's on the line.

“You want to play with fire, Emilio?” I ask, leaning over him, releasing one of his hips to plant my hand on the couch—so much for not bloodying up the furniture. “I will give you what you need until your Master is found. There aren't any Martellis to save you from that. None of them are capable of ruining you so thoroughly. And you won't get any of the Amatos, unless I allow it. But in order for me to do that...” I pull back, resting my cock at his entrance for a long moment before plunging in again. I punctuate every thrust with words. “You. Will. Learn. Your. Place.”



Grinding into him, I fuck him hard and deep, skating across his prostate and hearing his cries turn to moans of pleasure. Holding still, I take a second to catch my breath before reaching down for my belt. Wrapping it around his neck, I thread the buckle through and make sure it's flush against the skin at the back of his neck.

Makeshift noose in hand, I tighten it until there's just enough space for him to suck in air. A gasp that's not mine or Emilio's has me looking over my shoulder. In the doorway stands Tennant, Roman, Jude, and Benjamin. The latter looks to be a mixture of horrified and concerned, but I don't pay him much mind. My worry is on Roman, who looks shocked at what he walked in on, even as he holds Jude around the waist. I can't read the expression on Jude's face, but I know him well enough by now to guess that he is...not pleased by what's occurring. Still, I'm not worried, he knows better than to question me. Tennant looks bored as he leans against the entryway. I know he's not, but he'll never let people outside our dynamic see what lies underneath his unaffected facade.

Turning back to Emilio, I tell him, "We have an audience. Why don't we put on a good show for them?"

I begin fucking him again, tightening the belt and cutting off his air supply. I'm usually on the other side of such play, but Tennant has taught me a lot over the years. I'm not worried about harming him, even if I can hear some type of commotion behind me—I'm assuming one of the Martellis is objecting to such play.

I fuck into him, short and brutal thrusts that push him into the couch. The only thing holding him up now is the belt-leash. Relaxing my hold on the leather, I let him suck in some much-needed air as I swivel my hips and find the perfect angle to brush against his prostate. He pulls at the couch cushions, and I moan as his ass tightens.

Pulling away until I'm almost all the way out of him, I relish in his whine of displeasure. "You're not coming today," I tell him, tightening the belt once more.

“You need to learn to not be a disrespectful shit.”

With that, I cut off his air supply and fuck him until I’m on the brink of orgasm. It doesn’t take long, just knowing I’m being watched by so many people has my balls tightening and my spine tingling with pleasure. I’m not an exhibitionist, but I like them knowing I can and will put someone in their place if they deserve it.

A few more thrusts before I pull out, release the belt completely after loosening it, and grip my cock, fisting it hard and fast until I come all over Emilio’s bloodied ass, leaving my final mark.

I take a moment to catch my breath before I remove the belt from around his throat, running my fingers along his skin in a quick check to make sure I didn’t damage him. Over my shoulder I say, “Call Doc.”

“Already did, Tesoro; he should be here any second.”

With a nod of acknowledgement to Tennant, I help Emilio stretch out on the floor. It’s not the most comfortable place, but even though there’s some blood on the couch already, I’d rather not get glared at while walking through the halls by the maids because I made more of a mess than they would have preferred.

“Are you okay, Cucciolo?”

Emilio sucks in a breath but nods, even as his glassy eyes open and close slowly. “Just...fine...” he says in a wrecked, fucked out voice.

Leaning down, I kiss the corner of his mouth. “Good. Don’t worry, I’ll take care of you.”

He hums and closes his eyes, though I can tell by his ragged breathing that he’s not

asleep yet.

Looking away from my charge for a moment, I make sure I have the attention of all three of my lovers and sign, “We’ll talk later.”

They all nod, different expressions on their faces, but nothing that makes me think I fucked things up irreparably with them. And that’s all that matters. Any issues we have can be fixed with time, conversation, and possibly a few orgasms. If I ever thought otherwise, I never would have fucked my cucciolo.

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:05 am*

Lio adjusts himself, trying to find a way to be comfortable in the limo. Considering the stitches the Amato Doc had to use, I'm unsurprised he's feeling it—especially since he refused pain medication. He didn't want to be in a daze in case anything happened. While I'd find that admirable, I'm the one who had to listen—through the door—to him arguing with Doc.

From what Roman sulkily told me, Lio is lucky he won that round. Dr. Ranlen may have an acerbic tongue, but I'd rather deal with her than Doc's less than welcoming bedside manner. And for fuck's sake, may they never meet.

At least I was able to overhear Lio and Doc talking about safety. It was a relief to hear that the Amatos take safety seriously, with the blood play and sex they all engage in. I may not always agree with Il Padrone's policies, but I respect his view on testing, making sure his Boys are safe, including being on PrEP.

"Fuck," Lio hisses as his back is jostled. "Fucking hell, this is going to suck."

I don't say a word. I want to point out that it's his own fault, but at the same time, I do understand. My Marcus is the same way. He needs a level of control to keep his sanity. None of us are able to give that to Lio. If Hollis can do it... I suppose, Il Padrone can just kill Hollis afterwards, to make things more simple. Although, from what I've heard, Il Padrone lets others control Lio when he's unavailable—likely to encourage as much sanity as Lio possesses.

Instead of addressing that, I pull his attention to another major issue. "What are you going to do about Benjamin? And, I'd like to point out, Ignacio?"

Growling, he runs his fingers through his hair, wincing as it pulls at his stitches. “Fuck. I don’t even want to think about Ignacio’s reaction. Tennant insisted on Benjamin staying there and, while I’m not happy, I understand his point. Benjamin hasn’t received any training yet to be a Second. If he’s going to be effective, he needs it, and fuck knows I don’t have time to do it. And regardless of the fact Luca trained me, there’s no way in hell I’m letting him teach Benjamin. When Luca was my teacher, it was under Il Padrone’s careful watch.”

“Well, we can at least say Benjamin agreed. Preferably without telling them that was after he threw a fit about your...treatment.” Lio snorts, shaking his head. “Yeah, I know. You got what you needed, and finally convinced Benjamin of that. It was still a tad shocking to your best friend. The Amatos prefer blood play far more than we do.”

“Eh. True. Had it not included blood play, he wouldn’t have batted an eye. It felt good to release that tension, though. And now we have a stronger tie to the Amatos.”

I struggle to hold back words to that. I will never understand how the Martellis treat sex. Marcus doesn’t bat an eye at their orgies, insisting it’s a way they connect. To tie their personal relationships together. Whatever. If this does strengthen the alliance, I’m all for it, I guess. I’m just not looking forward to explaining to Ignacio why the fuck we left Benjamin there.

“Are you going to have someone step in while Benjamin’s training?” I ask, tightening my hand into a fist as I worry that he’ll choose Luca.

Rolling his head around, he stares out the window of the limo. He’s quiet as we pass the scenery. Finally, he sighs. “I’ll need to, unfortunately. It’ll be short-term. I have faith Tennant will get Benjamin to an acceptable level shortly. We can figure something out after that. I...I’m worried about it.”

Humming, I acknowledge the stress of the position. “Who are you thinking about?”

“There’s Luca. He trained me. He’s already been a Second. Problem is, I don’t trust him. I also feel like he’d try to take over, and he’s already pissed the Amatos off. Really, I’d feel better if he was back doing what Master ordered him to do, instead of being here. Master will not be happy that he disregarded orders, but that’s not my problem.

“Ignacio, I think, will be too busy being worried about Benjamin. Marcus needs to stay concentrated on strategy, and both of you need to be there for Cole as well, or I’d choose you. I think it has to be Antonio. He fits well. He’s referred to as Ghost for a reason, and I could use that. The twins can take over his job momentarily. What is your opinion?”

I stare at him, unsure why he’d ask me, skipping over the shock of being included. “You’ve been around them longer.”

Lio rolls his eyes at me, huffing out, “Yes, and you have significant experience as a LEO. You can’t tell me you don’t know how to examine data and give an analysis.”

Tilting my head, I can’t say he’s wrong. I stroke my chin as I walk through it, and I can’t find a hole in his reasoning. “I’m inclined to agree with your own assessment. Hopefully, Benjamin won’t be gone long. I think he’s the best option for you, but until then, Antonio would be the best out of all of the options.”

We lapse into silence again until the limo slows to a stop. Lio takes a deep breath and nods, as if bracing himself against what’s to come. I mentally wish him luck, because this is going to be a shit show. I intercept him as he tries to get out, glaring him into submission. He needs to fucking remember, now that he’s acting as Boss, we have to get out before him.

Grumbling, he follows me out of the limo, but hesitates at the steps, looking at the mansion as if for the first time. I wonder what's going through his head as he pans from one side of the expansive house to the next. Times like this, I'm reminded he's only in his early twenties. Maybe I'm jaded, but I've slipped into this world gradually, compared to what Lio has gone through. Either way, he shakes it off and gestures for me to continue. The guards open the door to the mansion, and I'm not surprised to find the Boys standing in the foyer—ready to pounce.

“Where the fuck is Benjamin?” Ignacio demands when the door closes behind Lio. His hair is tousled, his arms are spread in either anger or worry—maybe both.

I glance back at Lio and quickly move aside. Ignacio is taking the exact wrong track on this one. “He's being trained. By an expert.”

“I trained?—”

“He survived?—”

“Enough!” Lio roars, cutting off Luca and Ignacio. There's a mild wince as his body tenses and he straightens his back, but I think I'm the only one who catches it. “Yes, he survived Jax. That doesn't give him the necessary skills to be a Second. But it sure as hell shows he'll make a fucking excellent one. Luca, you trained me. Yes. But Tennant is making a fucking great offer. Do you know how many people would be grateful to learn under him? Most of all. This. Is. Not. Your. Choice. Not only did Benjamin choose to stay, I am the Boss . You will not question me.”

“What do you need from me?” I cut in quickly, trying to stop any stupidity. The problem is? Stupidity has no limit.

“This is fucking bullshit! You should have pulled Benjamin out. Even if Tennant is training him, there's no reason for him to stay. And why the hell are you wincing?”

Did they do something to you? They're supposed to be our fucking allies!" Ignacio rants, stalking toward Lio and towering over him.

Lio turns to me, this time not hiding the pain from his back, and gestures toward Ignacio. "Take him to the playroom. I believe a lesson is needed on who controls this family. And the Amatos are still our allies. I'm wincing because Hollis gave me what I needed, what Il Padrone would have approved of. Before any of you dare bring that into question, think fucking hard on that last part."

Sighing, I step forward and grab Ignacio by the arms, locking them behind him. Fucking idiot. When he struggles, I warn him, "Don't make me hurt you."

Thankfully, it sounds like Luca has shut the fuck up. At least, I can't hear his annoying voice as I push Ignacio upstairs.

When I get Ignacio into the playroom, I skip over the manacles, having some respect for what he went through while chained to a wall with Jax. Instead, I push him onto the spanking bench. Not that it's likely much better. Still, it's what I have to work with.

He at least doesn't fight me as I strap him down, his hands going to the pegs and relaxing the best he can. It shows how often he's faced this room. Marcus told me that Ignacio is the one who has faced the black room the most, so I have major doubts this will do much.

I barely hear the door open, Lio slipping into the room quietly. I watch as Lio closes it and takes in the situation in front of him. There's a flicker of anguish in his eyes before they go flat. It's a terrifying expression—one I hope is never turned on me.

"Ignacio...you fucked up. Not only am I disappointed, but so will Il Padrone be when he's back. Worse, I think, for you will be when I tell Benjamin what happened. And I



will tell him. You think as my Second he'd put up with your shit? You're not doing him any favors. He wouldn't thank you for it."

I back up, letting Lio come closer to circle around Ignacio. By the time he's finished, he's facing Ignacio head on. He yanks Ignacio's head up by his hair, forcing him to meet his eyes.

Ignacio struggles against the grip, growling out, "Benjamin doesn't know what he's getting into. You should be protecting him. He can only be a Second if he isn't broken!"

"You must have a very low opinion of your Little Mouse. I believe in him." Lio takes out his knife and passes it to me, gesturing for me to strip Ignacio, using the only method I can now that he's tied down. "You're not going to make this easy on me. But I'm fine with that."

I finish cutting through Ignacio's clothes—thankfully, he wasn't still wearing a suit jacket. Lio lets go of Ignacio's head and strides toward the wall where Il Padrone keeps all of his toys. Murmuring to himself, he grabs three items from it. I'm not surprised by two of them—but I raise my eyebrow at the third. He passes me a flogger and cane, keeping the prostate massager for himself.

Ducking down, he picks up the lube from below the spanking bench. Silently, he prepares Ignacio and slips the massager in. Ignacio's body jerks against the restraints as he hisses.

With it firmly in place, Lio turns it on and moves in front of Ignacio. It's connected to a wireless remote, giving Lio multiple options to play with. He taps Ignacio's chin, and the moan Ignacio must have been holding in slips out when he looks up at Lio.

"I'm going to make you come. And while I do, I want you to think about the fact that

Benjamin is at the Amatos, working his ass off to come back, to be better, all for the Family—including you. But here you are, getting pleasure...even if it will come with a side of pain.” Lio glances at me and commands, “Start with the flogger.”

“Yes, Boss.” I set the cane down next to me and start swinging the rubber flogger, trying to be at least somewhat gentle in the beginning, knowing it’s going to hurt like hell. At Lio’s sharp glance, I inhale deeply and pick up the pace and firmness, ignoring Ignacio’s pained cries—and this is before the cane.

“I’m not going to give you an option on coming. Because I’ll have Keegan continue until you do it. Until you reach that moment where you tip over and hit your pleasure, he’s going to keep this up. I suggest you stop holding back. But, I’ll be nice and help you out.” Lio presses a button on the remote, and Ignacio’s back bows as much as possible against the restraints, which isn’t much.

I continue on, trying to block out the cries and moans. The fuckery Lio is doing...it’s more than I expected him to be capable of, and it shocks me to see him doing it. Reminding Ignacio he’ll have pleasure while his lover is facing only pain...it’s fucking evil. But this is what he gets for going against the Boss. It certainly is a reminder for me—and I’ll fucking relay it to Marcus as well.

“Please,” Ignacio whimpers, and Lio holds up a hand at me. I quickly stop, hoping this is the end.

“Are you going to come?” Lio whispers, just loud enough for me to hear.

“I. Don’t. Want. To,” Ignacio grits out. His body is covered in sweat, and his ass is so red, I know it’s going to be more than miserable tomorrow.

“Too bad.” Lio’s voice is ice cold, and I shiver from it. “I’ll adjust the setting again, but you don’t have much more to go. And since I gave you a small break, I’ll have

Keegan use the cane to make up for it.”

I swallow, setting the flogger down and picking up the cane. From the marks on Ignacio, I worry this will be too much. “Boss?—”

“Do you need to switch places with Ignacio?” Lio interrupts me. Grinding my teeth, I shake my head. “Then start—no warm up.”

“Fuck,” I mutter. “Come on, Ignacio. Please.”

I’m five strokes in when Lio hits the remote again. Finally, Ignacio breaks, and screams out his orgasm. I quickly drop the cane, surprised when I realize how hard I’m breathing. This may as well have been a punishment for us both. I enjoy what I do with Marcus, reminding him who he belongs to, and hell, even putting him in his place. But this? This was too much.

Lio kneels down, flinching as the stitches in his back no doubt pull. He stares at Ignacio with no compassion. Gone is the teddy bear that Benjamin teases him about. No, right now, the homicidal part has taken over—a psychopath in my mind, certainly.

“Remember. Your Little Mouse is suffering, and you got to enjoy yourself.”

Ignacio sobs harder than when I was striking him. I cringe because did Lio have to keep reminding Ignacio of Benjamin, and what he was going through? I can’t imagine having to come to that. When Lio stands up, his gaze flicks to me.

“Help me get him on the bed and you can go. But send Antonio a text to be here in the morning. Dr. Ranlen, as well.”

We work silently, and I’m thankful for it. I have a feeling this will keep me up at

night—seeing this new side of Lio. I suppose it may not be a new side, but the mask finally slipping. I hope to fuck we find Il Padrone soon, before the mask is gone completely.

I leave them while Lio is putting cream on Ignacio, murmuring something to him. I'm not sure if he's trying to comfort him or reminding him of the consequences. Whatever. I give the nod of respect as I exit.

For a moment, I just stand there, wondering what the hell is going to happen next. Shaking it off, I send the two required texts, quickly receiving agreements back. Without wasting any more time, I head to my Marcus. This time, I'm the one who needs reassurance from my love. And a firm plan on what we need to do to get Lio's Master back.

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:05 am*

It's strange being in Cristian's office without him, mainly because no one is allowed in the room, save for Tennant and Doc, without his express permission. Even stranger when it's, for the moment, considered Roman's office.

The door shutting behind Tennant doesn't make a sound, but all the same, the closed confinement makes my skin itch. I don't regret what I did with Emilio, but that doesn't stop me from feeling trapped.

Roman and Jude lean against the front of the desk, their shoulders touching as they look at me when I take a seat across from them. Tennant taking the seat next to me makes the unsettled feeling worse.

"If you're expecting an apology," I tell them, "you'll be waiting a long time."

Jude scoffs. "Of course we don't, but I think an explanation is warranted."

Roman must see me bristle from Jude's tone because he quickly says, "He doesn't know how the Martellis work."

"Allesandro Martelli keeps his inner circle—his Boys—in line using sex," I explain. "They rely on one another, and are as close as brothers. A true family, much like we are. Their lives just revolve around more pleasure and pain than ours does. Emilio needed something specific that he can't get from his Boys. They can fuck him, sure, but his need to be put in his place by his Master isn't something as easily obtained."

"And you so graciously jumped to help him?" I don't blame the derision in Jude's voice. I'd be pissed if it was any of them.

“No, I put a little shit in his place. There’s only so much even I can take before I break. If you thought I’d let someone get away with that level of disrespect, you haven’t been paying attention, Bello. It’s not so different from me putting any of you in your place. Emilio isn’t mine, but he needs something I can give him. It’d be remiss of me to let our allies down.”

Tennant snorts and I glance at him to see he’s fighting a smirk. “It’s okay to admit you wanted to fuck him, Tesoro.”

I shake my head. “I didn’t, not really. He gets under my skin, and I want to put him on his knees. I didn’t plan on fucking him. But when you have someone who bleeds so beautifully... I figured there was no point in resisting.”

“So this is going to be a regular thing?” Roman asks.

“Does that bother you?”

“Would it matter if it did?” Jude challenges, lifting his chin defiantly as his pale green eyes go hard.

“Of course it would. We have enough going on, the last thing any of us needs to deal with is jealousy or hurt feelings. I won’t apologize for what I did because I’m not sorry, but if asked, I won’t touch him again. We need the Martellis to be strong, and sane enough to help stand against whatever’s coming for our Families, but not at the risk of our own sanity.”

“Who needs sanity?” Roman tries to grin, but under the weight of all the seriousness we’re dealing with, it falls flat.

“Definitely not me,” Tennant replies. “You didn’t do anything wrong, Tesoro. You saw someone in need and gave it to them. Is it something any of us would have done?”

No, but that is only because we live by your rules.”

He says it so simply, and a fissure of anxiety rushes through me. I’ve never hidden my possessive need of them. Even if my accepting both Roman and Jude seemed easy, it wasn’t.

My past meant latching onto Tennant was the only thing I could do, once I finally decided to let him in. Roman and Jude became extensions of that, and as proven before, I’d kill to keep that intact. There’s a reason I was the first one to make a move with Jude, why our relationship was the cornerstone to ending up where we are today.

What I’ve done with Emilio should have been exactly that, except unlike with Jude, there was no discussion about it beforehand. No one had a chance to say they were uncomfortable with it. Not that I need the words from Ten; he’s always been easy for me to read, and his opinions on monogamy and closed relationships are well-known and acknowledged.

It’s Roman and Jude I’m unsure about. Their protests can’t change what happened, but they’ll be taken into consideration when it comes to the next steps.

“Emilio needed what he got, maybe not the way he got it, but he’s been pushing since we first learned about Il Padrone being kidnapped. I, for one, don’t want to have to clean up whatever mess would be left behind if an already unstable Boy went off the rails.”

“Oh, so you fucked him because you’re so altruistic?” Roman says.

I snort. “I fucked him because I wanted to. I made him bleed because he asked for it. Any objections?”

Roman shakes his head. “No, but does this mean the Martellis are fair game?”

I roll my eyes. “Yes, you can ask your friend to use you if you want, Giocattolo. Sei un ragazzo sporco.”

He snorts. “I mean, if I have your blessing, I wouldn’t mind having some fun with Lio. But that’s not why I was asking.” He nods his chin towards Tennant. “Ten’s been handed his perfect catnip, and I think he should be allowed to play.”

My immediate reaction is no. Hell no . But...that’s unfair. The double standard has always, always been that Tennant is mine.

He is the first person I ever trusted with my body and heart after everything that happened when I was a teenager. He never asked for my story, never cared about why I was so obsessive and possessive. Tennant, for all his faults, has only ever shown me how much he cares, in his own way. And has gone out of his way to make me his top priority, after Cristian.

Roman is right, Benjamin is Tennant’s perfect type, and he’s handed himself over on a silver platter. Denying Ten would be unfair, not that he’d ever see it that way.

“It’s true,” Jude says. “I saw how Benjamin and Ten responded to one another. It was like watching the two of you,” he gestures between me and Tennant, “and your weird foreplay dance.”

I snort at that. “Is that right? You want to taste Benjamin, Love?”

Tennant shrugs. “He’s attractive enough, and the fire in him calls to me, but I don’t need it.”

“No.” Reaching for him, I grab the back of his neck and pull him in for a harsh kiss, his teeth tugging on my lip until it bleeds. Pulling back, I stare into ice blue eyes that never look at me with anything but trust and endless patience. “I want you to. Give



him a taste of what he can have when he behaves. Mostragli il mostro sotto al gentiluomo.”

Tennant huffs. “Shall I film it, Tesoro? Do you want me to take him apart?”

My breath catches and the thought excites me, the previous anxiousness dissipating as a need to watch Tennant take the boy in hand rises. “Yes,” I answer simply.

Tennant grins, soft and indulgent. “Thank you for such a gift, Hol. I won’t disappoint.”

“Are we all good then?” Roman asks. “We’re all on the same page about Hollis doing whatever he needs to do in order to keep Lio under control?”

Tennant nods as he pulls back from me. “Yes. Someone needs to keep the little shit in line, and Hol is the best one to do it outside of his Master.”

Jude doesn’t speak for a long moment. When I look at him, it’s not hesitation I see in his gaze, but there is something there. He eventually nods, at the same time he nods his fist in a yes. “I don’t pretend to understand what Lio or any of the Martellis need,” he says slowly. “But I’m aware of how this Family works, and how important it is that we cultivate the friendships and alliances we have—especially in such a dire time. So if this is what he needs, who am I to stop you?”

“Good,” Tennant says. “Because we have other things that need our focus, like what Roman theorized earlier.”

“Yes,” I reply. “We can reevaluate and discuss it, but Ten is right; we have other things to worry about. Which is the whole reason Emilio and Keegan were here. Seems Keegan isn’t just a pretty face, as he also parsed out what Roman did. His knowledge of how law enforcement works will be helpful. He didn’t suggest which

branch of the law might be the ones after us, but considering they're using the locals to terrorize both our Families, I'd go out on a limb and suggest someone with federal authority. Only because they'd have the advantage of a bigger reach. However, that's a theory you'll want to run by him."

Roman nods. "I'll set up a meeting with him to see what other information he has, and what his thoughts are. I'm both glad that my theory proved to give us a way forward, and disturbed by it."

"That's the vibe I was getting from the Martellis too, before things took a turn."

Jude snorts. "Is that what we're calling it now?"

I cast a look at him, but don't say anything. Instead, Tennant moves things along. "We should get back to work then, if there are no other pressing matters. Joel rounded up two cops for me to interrogate, so that will be tomorrow's lesson. Today's didn't go exactly to plan, but with two of them, we can spread out the fun."

"Sinclair called with an update while I was on the way back here," Roman says. "He got Ricci off, but the dealers took the fall for the Family. Rose and Doc will be happy that her father isn't going to prison, but that doesn't fix our issue. Our distribution structure has been thrown out, and we're scrambling to make sure our people get what they need. Our sales of the weapons are also in disarray. The Russians understand and will hold off this shipment, but the gang isn't so willing to give us grace. I'll need you to go smooth over some feathers with them during the handover, Ten."

"I can do that. Don't worry, Little Prince, it'll be okay."

Roman doesn't look convinced, but nods anyway. "Thank you."

“I’ll go check up on Leandro, see how far he’s gotten without me.”

“I need to check in with the house guards and Carter,” Tennant says. “Then make sure our guest is settling in okay. I have no more use for you today, Agnellino, but be prepared for tomorrow.”

Jude gives him a bland smile. “Of course.”

With that, the meeting is adjourned, and we leave Roman in the office to work on setting the next meeting between the two Families.

Tennant goes off to find the Head of the House Guards, but when Jude tries to leave, I stop him, grabbing at his sleeve. “Come with me.”

He follows me to my office, where Leandro is diligently working. “Out,” I order.

Leandro turns his head to look at us, narrowing his eyes. “I’m doing the work of three people because the Martellis are too paranoid to call in H, and you want me to fuck off so you can get off? Fuck you.”

“I won’t ask again, Leandro. This will only take a few minutes. Go, take Boston out, get some food, anything that will get you out of here for ten minutes.”

He purses his lips and shakes his head, turning back to his computer for a few minutes before pushing away from the desk.

Grabbing Jude’s sleeve again, I lead him further into the office, around Leandro’s desk so the boy can wheel himself out.

“No sex,” he says as he snaps his fingers and commands Boston to follow. “I’m the one who has to deal with the smell, so keep your hands to yourselves.”

“Funny,” I drawl. “I didn’t realize you were in charge.”

He makes a noise of disgust before leaving the room, dog in tow.

“What’s this about?” Jude asks, leaning against my desk.

Getting into his personal space, I answer, “You tell me. Are you really okay with me and Emilio? Or Emilio and Roman? Benjamin and Tennant?”

He scowls. “I gave my answer, did I not? I didn’t protest. I don’t understand the whole training by sex thing that the Martellis have going on, but I do understand your need to control everything and everyone around you.”

There’s a bite to his tone, and it makes me grin. “Are you feeling possessive, Bello? Do you dislike the idea of anyone putting their hands on me?”

He glares, but I can see past the unaffected look he’s trying for. He’s not nearly as good as Tennant at hiding his emotions, though he tries to be. With a frustrated growl, he pushes me away, just enough for signing space. “Like it? No, but I understand you wouldn’t touch him if you didn’t need or want to. This is about more than just putting him in his place. It’s about you needing to control someone, and you can’t play your usual games with Tennant right now, so a substitute has been found in the Martelli boy.”

He’s right. The world is so topsy-turvy that my usual avenues of destressing are closed off at the moment. Neither Ten nor I can leave Roman for long, so the way we usually play is out of the question. That Jude picked up on it so easily says how much he truly does care, in his own way—even when he pretends not to.

“You’re right,” I reply. My signs are careful as I try to figure out how to word what I need to say. “I need it as much as he does, but I don’t want him, Agnellino. He’s a

puppy; cute with sharp teeth, but aside from that, he does nothing for me. You, Jude, with your barely-controlled sociopathy and your resistance to submit—even though we both know you want it—are what I want. Along with Tennant and Roman. The three of you are my life, Agnellino.” In a whisper, I say, “Sei il mio tutto.”

Switching back to ASL, I make sure my signs are clear, and that I show the truth of my words in my expression. “Never doubt my devotion to you, to what we’ve been building since you first showed up on our doorstep. Your curiosity and need to be loved drove you into our arms, and like hell are we going to give that up. Emilio and all the Martellis are fun, but they are not where my loyalties lie, outside of our common goal and the friendships we are building with them. Understood?”

Jude finally nods and replies, “Yes. I understand. You don’t need to get all sappy, Tesoro Mio.” The homesigns for Jude’s endearments mean more than the LIS translations of them, because they come from him and his need to express his devotion for us in both his language and ours .

Threading my fingers through his curls, I pull his mouth to mine, kissing him thoroughly, making him moan as his hips thrust against mine. It’d be so easy to put him on his knees right now, to show him where he belongs in this hierarchy of ours, but that’s not what either of us needs. No, this connection, the intimacy of the kiss, the way he surrenders to me, even though we both know that’s not his natural desire... It’s more important for us to stand on even ground, even as he lets me fuck his mouth with my tongue. I sink my teeth into his lips, lapping at the blood drawn, sharing the taste of him.

It’s different, sweeter than the blood I licked off Emilio. It means more—means everything .

Only when Leandro returns and lets out a derisive groan, saying, “No fucking in the office!”, do I pull away from my lover.

Jude looks at me with darkened pale green eyes, and a soft, self-satisfied smile that has me wanting to kiss him all over again.

“Okay?” I sign.

“Yeah,” he says. “Better, I think. Do whatever you want with the Martellis, Roman and Ten, too. I want to watch the three of you have fun... It might be educational.”

I grin. “I didn’t know you were such a voyeur, Bello.”

He huffs. “I liked watching you with Emilio. He’s very different from Roman in his responses.”

I hum in acknowledgement. Roman just wants to be used. The little shit will do anything and everything to get the desired result. Emilio’s submission...on the surface it looks the same, but in reality, he needs it to help keep his sanity. Both of them are cocksluts in their own right, which would make watching the two of them together very entertaining. That is, if Emilio is willing to top our Toy, because Roman sure won’t take up that mantle, even if it meant he got to have fun with his friend.

“I almost feel bad for Benjamin,” I tell him. “I don’t think he’s fully thought out what having Tennant will mean.”

Jude shrugs. “I think you underestimate him...but that’s definitely going to be a fun show.”

That is...very much one way to put it. Planting one last kiss on Jude’s irresistible mouth, I finally pull away. “Go, maybe stop in to see your training partner? I have work to do.”

“I should do that, yes. I don’t think any of the Martellis know what to make of me.”

I laugh at that. “Probably not, you’re an enigma, Agnellino. It’s what makes you so much fun to play with.”

He smiles and shakes his head. “Uh-huh. I’ll see you when Tennant comes to drag you out of here.”

When he leaves, to hopefully actually spend some time with our Martelli guest, I turn to my work, feeling lighter than I have since this whole mess started. If only the feeling would last.

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:05 am*

I groan as I roll out of bed when the alarm goes off. I feel like I've only slept for a couple of hours, and really, it probably wasn't much more than that. Being in our bed without my Master... It's an itch I can't scratch. I refuse to let the maids change the sheets, wanting to draw his scent to me each night. Yet, each inhale is like a knife to my heart.

Shuffling to the bathroom, I turn the shower on, blasting the hot water. By the time I step in, I'm at least a little more awake. When the water hits my back, I let out a yelp and scramble out of the shower.

Fuck . I didn't think about the fact my back was shredded, thanks to Hollis. I turn the water to a cooler temperature, praying I can at least get through a short shower. Fucker didn't hold back. Then again, it was exactly what I needed to make the chaos in my head slow down.

I'm not embarrassed by my needs, and Master taught me to get them fulfilled if he wasn't available. But fuck if I don't know how the Amatos are taking it right now. I'm assuming, if Hollis gave the okay, the rest of them will accept it, but not all of their faces showed joy—or acceptance. That's a problem for another day, and hopefully it's Hollis's, not mine.

Stepping back into the shower, I manage to grit my teeth and get cleaned up. I notice the water runs pink occasionally, and I hope to fuck I didn't pull any stitches. At least Dr. Ranlen will be here this morning. Chances are, she won't hold back her opinion any more than the Amato doctor did.

Once I'm dressed and ready, I head down to my Master's office. I have no desire to



go to the dining room. I know our family meals are important, but I don't have it in me today to pretend there's any normality in our lives right now. I barely sit down before Antonio and Dr. Ranlen come into the office. I knew I should have fucking closed the door.

"You wanted to see us?" Antonio asks as he stops in front of the desk.

I wave for them to sit and take a deep breath. I face Antonio first. "Benjamin is undergoing training with the Amatos, so right now, he's unavailable. I need a Second. I want you to take that position until Benjamin is back."

Antonio leans back in the chair, his jaw dropping. He goes to speak several times, but nothing comes out. I'm not surprised. We didn't exactly have the easiest start to our relationship.

Clearing his throat, he finally manages to say, "I'm very...surprised, but yes. It's an honor."

I don't show my relief, but I was worried he'd question my decision and I'd be forced to start the day by doling out more punishments. I didn't realize how fucking exhausting that must be for Il Padrone at times.

With that covered, I address Dr. Ranlen. "I know you're busy with your position at the hospital, but I need you here. We don't know what's going to happen. It's one, for your safety, and two, in case we have any medical needs."

With an arched brow, Dr. Ranlen retorts, "From what I hear, you already have needs."

I look up at the ceiling, cursing whichever Boy snitched on me. Shaking my head, I focus on her again. "Well, you know me...always having fun. Does that mean you'll

move back?”

“I suppose. But I expect you to keep me updated. And you’d better start going to family meals. I’m told you’ve been ignoring those as well. You need to keep your mental health in check—and not just by whatever else it is that you’re doing. Come see me after your meeting. I want to check out what happened.”

Without waiting for a dismissal, she stands and strolls out of the room, her heels clicking as she goes. I assume she’s headed to the clinic she has set up here.

“I have no idea how she can walk in those,” I comment lightly, before turning to more serious matters. I gesture for Antonio to speak, as I’m hoping he has some insight already.

“She has a point.” At my silent command for more, he clears his throat nervously. “You need to go back to the family dinners. Not only because it’s a way to pass information along, but also to reinforce our bond. We all need it. It doesn’t help if we become disconnected from each other.”

Sighing, I nod in agreement. “I know, you’re right. I just...haven’t had much of an appetite. But if anything, being around everyone will be good. We never know what may come up while talking.

“Speaking of that, I wanted to run something by you. You know we got hit by the LEOs? Well, from what we’re finding out, it’s open season on both us and the Amatos. Meaning, we can’t trust the cops, or hell, any of the legal system that we’re used to bribing. Some of them know too much. Where do you think they’ll hit next?”

“Fuck,” Antonio mutters. “We don’t exactly advertise everywhere we occupy, but there are certain warehouses they could take an educated guess on. Some dealer houses are probably marked. Let’s get a list and start moving things around. Maybe

we can convince the dealers to switch areas, if we can provide them with some different locations. We have safe houses that are off everyone's radar for a reason."

"Good point. Let's get the map out. We also need to get ahold of the Cartel. We can't have weapons and drugs rolling in right now. At least, not at the volume we usually do. I don't want them picked up either. They'd flip too easily—there's no reason for them to be loyal to us."

"What about Sergio?" I bite my lip at Antonio's reference to Master's cousin. Considering Luca was supposed to be in his territory, I'm not sure how to approach him. "Do you think Luca explained what happened?"

"Fuck. I hope not, but yeah. That's the only way he would have been able to leave so easily. I don't want other Families to know what's going on—even if they're related. We have a treaty with the Amatos. While we have one with Sergio based on blood, I can't exactly count on that. We'd be too easy to pick off, if he decided to."

"I'll talk to Luca. Maybe this will convince him to go back. He'd be more useful watching that situation. We're all hands on deck, but there's such a thing as too many people." I nod, understanding completely—especially when most of us are wary of Luca.

Antonio starts pointing to areas on the map, mainly warehouses that are more well known. "These are my guesses. I'd suggest maybe shifting things around."

"Hmm. We could even do a blind, don't you think? Leave a couple showing 'activity', but with nothing in there. That way, it makes the LEOs look like they're on a vendetta with nothing to back it up."

"Good idea. I'll start transferring some things over. One more thing... Do you think they'll hit the house?"

I sit back, stunned. I'd never considered it. I mean, fuck...why the hell would they risk it? Then again, most of our secrets are here. They could easily access information and our people here at the main house. Fuck .

"I don't even know where to begin. I know we'd need to get rid of our 'guest' room. The black room...but Il Padrone will be pissed if we get rid of it."

"What about the playroom and the nursery?" Twisting up his face, Antonio can't even meet my eyes.

"No...I think those can stay," I say after a moment of hesitation. "Yeah, they might freak some people out, but they can't do shit about BDSM—even if I'm sure they'll want to. It'd provide a red herring anyway. It's the other things I'm worried about...like documents. Fuck, our entire network. I'm not sure if they could get into that."

"Maybe ask Jenna?" Antonio rubs his chin, staring blankly at the table. Fuck, if there was ever a time for needing Master, it would be right now.

"Yeah, I'll contact her. I'll also call Hollis. I think he's honestly the best person to tell us how to make sure our network is secure enough that the cops wouldn't find anything." I close my eyes in defeat. I have a feeling I'm going to need to beg, and that is not my style—at least, not with anyone except Master.

"Who would have thought we'd be working with the Amatos? Trusting them like this. It's fucking weird."

"I don't disagree, but I'm friends with Roman anyway. Right now, it feels a little lopsided though. I don't want them to be the ones taking point on everything. So, find me something. Anything."

Chuckling softly, Antonio stands up. “Use that fire. It’s good to see it again. I’ll check in with you at dinner time, after I start rearranging some things. First up is making sure the house gets stripped.”

“Yeah, let the cleaners and maids know. I’ll call Jenna and Hollis after I see Dr. Ranlen.” I wave him out and let my head drop down.

Right now, we’re in defense. I need to start being on the offense. At least leaving some blinds may help us. But, for now, I need to come clean to Sarah and have her check the stitches. I’m not sure what she’ll say about my playtime with Hollis. Fuck knows I needed it, and I certainly wouldn’t pass it up again in the future, if it can bring my mind calmness. Although, shit, I hope they don’t always rely on blood play...

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:05 am*

“ I should have paid more attention when Tennant taught Roman how to lock pick,” I mutter, shaking my ankle lightly and hearing the chain rattle.

“It is rather uninspiring,” Allesandro says, glaring down at his own manacle. “I keep waiting for something to happen.”

“Oh?” I raise an eyebrow. “Do you hear that?” I look up at the camera. “You’re disappointing Il Padrone. I don’t think that’s a very good idea.”

Allesandro snorts, but our host doesn’t seem to think I’m clever as he screeches, “Shut up! You’d think you’d be more worried about your upcoming doom.”

Allesandro and I exchange looks, and it’s a feat not to roll my eyes. This dude can’t be serious. “It’s hard to feel anything when my entire body is numb, since we still don’t have chairs,” Allesandro drawls.

“You have interesting priorities. I’m sure your so-called Families would love to hear that you’re worried about a chair, when they’re trying to stay alive.”

If that’s supposed to scare us...this guy really knows nothing about our Families. My family is more likely to kill one another before someone else gets their hands on them.

“You’re awfully confident for someone who kidnaps two people, only to leave them in a room all day,” I say, channeling Tennant’s patent bored tone. “How...lacking in imagination.”

No comment from our captor, so maybe he's gotten tired of us—what a shame.

Standing, I shift from foot to foot, trying to get the blood flowing in my limbs before I begin pacing the few feet the chain allows. "If I die from boredom, Tennant will figure out how to bring me back just to ridicule me."

Allesandro huffs and shifts on the floor before standing—the whole sitting on the floor thing got old days ago. "My Boys will rally around me and not let me out of their sights." He scoffs. "As if I can't take care of myself." I give him a look and he grins. "Present situation excluded, of course. Though...there's obviously a traitor in our midst. I don't believe this asshole just got lucky. I wonder how long Emilio left them alive..."

I laugh. "They were dead the second he got what he needed from them. If it were Ten, I'd be fifty-fifty on if they were still alive or not. The fucker likes to play with his food. Your Emilio, though? I highly doubt anyone would be able to stop him from killing whoever gets in his way; Ten might try, and I'd pay money to see that."

"Your Second against mine? We could sell tickets to that."

"Something to add to our 'when we get out of here' list," I muse.

Tripping over the chain attached to my manacle, I sneer at it before toeing the chain, wanting to kick it in frustration, but I can't since I'm fucking attached to it.

"I'm going to choke you with this chain," I snarl at the camera. "But I won't kill you with it. No, your death is going to be a slow, painful one."

No response comes, of course, and I shake my head in disgust, returning to my pacing. As I do so, I begin humming.

“Anything but fucking Christmas,” Allesandro begs. “I’ll even take Taylor Swift again.”

“You’ve met my family,” I reply. “It’s either Christmas or whatever nonsense Roman is obsessing over, so my repertoire of songs is very limited.”

Before he can respond, the door to our cell opens and three men come in. They head directly for me, and though I try to fight them off, being chained to the wall, as well as exhausted and sore from sitting on the fucking floor, I’m not at my best.

I get a few hits in, but one of them shoves me face first against the wall, making my head ache as it comes into contact with the wall. My face scrapes against the cement, and I hiss at the sting.

My arms are restrained behind my back, and though I can hear Allesandro fighting and protesting behind me, the two people that are on me manage to unhook my chain from the wall and begin dragging me out of the room.

At least things are starting to get interesting...



## Page 27

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:05 am*

Fuck! My heart pounds as the three men enter the room, rushing at Cristian. I don't have much of a chance to protest as one of them splits off, heading towards me, another man joining in the fray soon after.

Where the fuck did he come from?

Growling, I throw punches, and given the grunts of pain, I clearly manage to land some.

I hear Cristian shout as he's dragged out of the room, and it's enough of a distraction that I lose any advantage. Shit. Ignacio would kick my ass for that.

My arms are locked behind me, and they click the cuffs on, unlocking the manacle. With an evil grin, I kick out, clipping the goon in the chin. He goes sprawling, and I laugh at the blood on his face.

Suddenly, I feel a sharp jab in my neck, and I curse because I know exactly what that means. I hate being fucking drugged. Fuckers are going to pay for this shit...

I try to concentrate on what's going on around me, but it's impossible as I'm dragged down into the fake slumber. It envelops me like an old demon, and I can only hope it's one that doesn't leave a damn hangover.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Groaning, I wake to the sound of fucking dripping. A faucet that doesn't seem to completely shut off. It pisses me the fuck off. If we're going to be kidnapped, is it too

much to ask that our kidnapper actually possess the means to do it correctly?

My head throbs from the damn medication, and the dripping. At least it's not Christmas music. Cristian was driving me nuts with that. I doubt Tennant is the only psychopath the Amatos have. After all, who the fuck would listen to Christmas music all year round? Only someone who is completely broken and fucked up would do that.

I'm sitting in a chair with my hands locked down on a table. I try to move my hands, but the metal is unforgiving, and whoever did it made sure I couldn't slip them through the restraints.

The door bangs open and I glance toward the man entering. He's...unimpressive. I'd walk past him and wouldn't give his looks a second thought.

He's got mousy brown hair, but the haircut is too shaggy to be called stylish, and his eyes a dull brown that matches his hair. His facial features aren't ugly, but there's nothing compelling about them. Even his body type is just...regular. He's not thin, he's not overweight. I almost want to roll my eyes at the normality of this man. And yet, he dared take Cristian and me captive? No wonder he needed help from his goons.

"Enjoying your time here?" The man smirks, and I struggle not to roll my eyes.

"The accommodations could be better, but I must say, it's nice to have a break from my day-to-day chaos." I shrug one shoulder, pretending to be unaffected, even if I'm mentally calculating how I'd kill him. It won't be quick or easy.

He flushes at my statement and tosses a newspaper at me. I quirk an eyebrow at him, deliberately staring at one manacle then the other. Huffing, he situates the newspaper in front of me, so that I can see it more clearly. "You've made the headlines. Aren't

you proud?”

I ignore his mocking words and glance down. Criminal Families Under Investigation . Well, fuck. That doesn't sound good. I skim what I can see of the article, wanting to grimace when I learn about the raids, but refusing to give him the satisfaction.

Shit. My Family must be going crazy. We pay off the LEOs for a fucking reason. None of this should be happening.

I switch my attention back to him, yawning as if the news isn't disturbing. “Sounds boring.”

Cursing, the man slaps his hands on the metal desk, leaning forward into my personal space. I refuse to lean back, or to give him the satisfaction of thinking he's throwing me off. Fuck that shit.

He hits the desk again with his right hand, and this time, I do roll my eyes. Fucking temper tantrum. Really? I expect better from a kidnapper.

“I'm going to destroy everything you've built. Your so-called precious family will pay for your sins. Do you want to know why?”

“Not really. I mean, I'm sure you'll be doing the whole evil monologue at some point. I'll pretend to listen, if that's what you want.”

He pushes off from the table, disgust marring his features. “I am not the villain. I'm the avenging angel. I will rid this city of crime and be celebrated.”

“Wow. You have a complex, don't you? Avenging angel? Really?” I snort at the ridiculousness. “And you think getting rid of my Family and the Amatos will make the city crime free? You're delusional. If anything, we keep the crime in check.

Nobody messes with our territories. But if you want true lawlessness, proceed at your own risk. Not that you'd ever succeed."

"Fine. I won't tell you, if that's what you want. Instead, I'll let you ponder while I make you suffer." He turns toward the door, knocking on it. At the signal, two more men enter, but these ones are wearing masks. Pussies. Both of them. If you're going to be part of criminal activity, fucking own it.

The door doesn't close, and the sound of screaming echoes down the hallway. The man grins evilly at me. "Hear that? That's your buddy. Sounds like he's enjoying what you'll be getting."

I bark out a laugh. "Are you fucking for real? That's not Cristian. Or if it is, it's playing on a loop. Nothing you can do would cause that continuous screaming. Hell, you could be tearing him apart piece by piece and he wouldn't give you that. You don't have a fucking clue the games he plays and his strength."

His face flushes an even deeper red than before. It verges on purple, and his hands curl into tight fists. "You think you'll be any different?"

I notice he sidesteps my response, and this time I snort. "I'm sure. But hey, if you want to test our strength, why don't you join me here? We can both have fun, and we'll see which one of us screams the most."

The man whispers something to one of the goons before whirling out of the room, slamming the door shut. The goon laughs darkly, coating the room in tension. Silence is always more effective than being talked at continuously. I have a feeling this shit isn't going to be that much fun.

The goon pulls out a knife, and I almost grimace. I'm not like Cristian, blood play really isn't my kink. But, whatever. They're not going to get the satisfaction of seeing

me crumble.

I watch him warily and almost sigh in resignation when he goes straight for my hand. I'm going to lose a finger, I know it. And Lio will be pissed. Motherfucker better hope I don't get a knife when I leave, because he'll lose way more than a finger. Maybe cutting off their dicks would be good. Then I can make them choke on them.

I grit my teeth, refusing to scream when he brings the knife down on my right pointer finger. Mother. Fucker. I don't glance down, keeping my eyes on the goon who seems disappointed by my lack of reaction. He growls and goes for another, but the other goon stops the man's arm as it moves in a downward arc.

For a moment, I think I'm escaping from more, but then the second goon brings out a knife of his own. Fuck, leave my hands alone. I have punishments to dole out, and would prefer to keep my fucking fingers.

I glare at the goon, almost daring him to continue. When he grins at me, I narrow my eyes. There's something familiar about him, even through the mask.

Cocking my head slightly, I try to think where I recognize him from. I don't get much of a chance to think about it before the man rips my dress shirt to shreds, not being careful about nicking my skin. That's a fucking expensive shirt, worth far more than him, I imagine.

I'm disgusted by their uncouthness. I wrinkle my nose at them, ignoring the throbbing in what's left of my finger. Hopefully, they'll at least stop the bleeding soon. Fuckers are way too uneducated about torture. Sloppy.

I'm not sure how long it lasts, as they take turns slicing at my skin, from long slices to nicks. I can't find a pattern, so I'm stuck on the edge of waiting. It's a dangerous dance.

They're trying to rip a scream from me, and I'm trying to refuse. One of us will win out. I can only hope they tire first, as they're showing signs of exhaustion from the constant movement around me.

"Fuck it," one of the goons mutters from behind me, and red hot agony spears through my shoulder. I finally scream and their laughter fills the room.

I fight to stay upright, but between the finger wound, the slicing, and now the fucking stabbing, the room begins to spin. Fuck . I hope Cristian held on for longer.

I start to slip into inky darkness, slumping forward. I'm down, but not out. I shake my head, trying to clear my vision, but when the knife is yanked out, I can't hold it back anymore, and the world goes dark.

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:05 am*

“Where’s Jude?” Benjamin asks as I usher him into the training room.

“With his physical therapist. He’ll join us before we head to the torture chamber for round two of that training. For now, I need to test your hand-to-hand readiness. I know where Jude stands, so his presence is unnecessary. Unless you want an audience to your humiliation?”

Not that I tell him, but he’ll get one anyway. The cameras in here are rarely turned on, and even then, the footage isn’t regularly monitored, unless we have a reason to look.

What I won’t tell Benjamin is he is the reason my Tesoro will be keeping a close eye on all the training rooms, both here at the house and in my training facilities.

“You’re so sure you’re going to win?”

I grin and take a step closer, impressed that he doesn’t try to back away, though a fissure of worry crosses his face before his expression smooths out. “Do you think you can beat me, Topolino?”

“Guess we’ll find out, won’t we?”

Reaching a hand out, I grin wider when Benjamin involuntarily flinches. I haven’t been ignorant to the way he’s been trying to keep his distance—he couldn’t be more blatantly obvious if he tried. Smoothing a hand over his soft cheek, I don’t try to hide how much enjoyment I get from the way his face flushes and how his breath catches.

“Such a precious baby mouse,” I muse. “No wonder Ignacio kept you, even if he did you a disservice by not training you properly.”

Benjamin finally moves away, the loss of contact not at all tempering my interest. “You have no idea of the things we’ve gone through... I’m sorry torturing each other hasn’t been high on our priority list, instead we were taking down Jax and cleaning up after his mess.”

I hum. “I don’t have a very high opinion of your organization right now, Topolino. That you were kidnapped and tortured should have put a fire under your fiancé’s ass to get you properly trained.” I sneer. “Instead, he decided to coddle you.”

Benjamin moves forward, his eyes burning with anger behind his glasses to mask the flash of pain there. “You have no fucking idea what we went through while we were with that psycho. Do not pretend like you know everything.”

I smirk, happy to see the spark igniting in my Topolino. “Don’t I?” I tilt my head, wearing my arrogance like a cloak as I run various scenarios through my mind. There are so many moves Benjamin could make, and as he’s proven to be unpredictable thus far, it’s best to have different plans in place.

“I don’t have to have been there to guess what might have happened to you and your precious Ignacio... After all, you’re not the only one who’s ever been kidnapped. Though, I highly doubt you personally suffered much. Ignacio didn’t earn the name Chaos for no reason. It wouldn’t be remiss of me to assume he made a nuisance of himself in order to protect you.”

“Do not talk about things you don’t understand!” He moves until we’re a hair’s breadth apart, his sea green eyes are filled with a fire that gets my blood heating, and my cock perking up at the thought of putting this boy in his place. “You have no idea what I suffered for my Family, for my love.”



I smile and shrug. “A little torture is good for the soul. That you didn’t insist on being properly trained so it wouldn’t happen again is your problem, and now mine.”

I see his punch coming a mile away, but I allow it to hit me. I absorb the shock and pain before grabbing Benjamin’s arm and spinning him around, locking an arm around his throat and holding him close to me as he flails.

“One point for me, Topolino,” I whisper in his ear.

Letting him go, I practically skip away, bracing myself for him. Benjamin spins around, his cheeks are flushed and his breathing is slightly elevated already. His anger is ramped up, and it makes me internally grin. He’s playing right into my hands, stupid, stupid boy.

“Do you seriously think this is a game? Taunting me and trying to get me to break?”

I shrug. “It worked, didn’t it?” I touch the edge of my jaw, which stings a little from his punch, but barely—we’ll have to work on that.

He attacks again, but even his attempt to blindside me by using his non-dominant hand fails due to the sheer predictability of the move. This time, I hit him instead of just restraining him.

He rears back, lifting a hand to his mouth to wipe the blood, because I don’t pull my punches. I don’t give him time to think before attacking him head on.

Benjamin stumbles back, trying to run away from me, but it just makes me smile, and gives me exactly what I want.

He tries to counter my attack, and manages to block some of the hits aimed his way, but his attempts at striking me are weak, and make me even more determined to whip

him into shape.

His chest is rising fast when he hits the wall, realizing he's allowed himself to be backed into a corner with limited escape options.

Grabbing him by the throat, I huff at his feeble attempt to break away. "You know," I say conversationally. "In order to be declared fit for duty, all of my men must pass one last test." Leaning in, I brush my lips against his cheek before whispering in his ear as I say, "Do you know what that test is, Topolino?"

He struggles, his body deliciously rubbing against mine, causing my cock to jerk in my pants. Benjamin tries to kick me, his foot grazing against my shin, but I just tighten my hold on his throat.

"They have to fight me," I tell him. "I don't expect them to win. Joel is the only one who can beat me more than once—aside from Cristian, that is. No, they don't have to win, but they are expected to put up a good fight and prove they won't go down so easily."

Easing up on him, I stare into his wide sea green eyes,—made impossibly wider thanks to the smudged makeup around them—and have to fight back the instinct to take this boy hard and fast... When I get him underneath me, it'll be hard, but not fast. No, I want to take my Topolino apart piece by piece. I want him to writhe and scream for me, before I give him the pleasure he's all but begging for.

"You? You wouldn't pass muster. But...don't worry, my sweet topolino. I will help you. I will make it so people like Jax will never lay a hand on you again, and if they do?" I give him my most feral grin. "They will regret it for the remainder of their short lives as you teach them why you deserve to stand by Emilio's side."

Leaning in again, I say, "I will turn you into the best version of yourself, Baby

Mouse; after I ruin you, of course.”

I press a hard kiss to his lips, drinking down his gasp before pulling away, even though it’s the last thing I want to do. “What was done to you left a scar, but it also taught you how strong you are, Benjamin. Remember that when I make you hate me. Because you will hate me, but that’s okay. I’m going to make you into something better, so you can continue to survive.” Letting him go completely, I move back to the center of the room.

Benjamin slumps against the wall, as if it’s the only thing holding him up.

“Come on, Topolino. Time for round two, I know you have it in you...”

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:05 am*

I push off the wall, holding back my smile. Fuck . He's so damn compelling, especially when he's being arrogant as fuck. And that damn kiss...I want more. He lights me up, throwing fire on the energy that's surging through me.

Sure, there's no way in hell I'll win against him, but he still thinks he'll break me. I can't wait for him to learn he's wrong. I'm not trained nearly as well as I should be—I'll give him that—but he forgets I'm a physical therapist, and we have plenty of moves. I'm also Lio's best friend, and he should fucking remember that. Lio may not have had time to teach me everything—it's why I'm here after all—but I'm not the helpless little mouse he seems to believe I am.

I fall into a fighting stance, deliberately keeping it sloppy and weak. The wicked grin Tennant gives me plays right into my hand. He's so fucking sure of himself, I can't wait until I teach him otherwise.

“Are you going to do anything? Or will I die from boredom first?” Tennant calls out, as he bounces on the balls of his feet.

“Patience. Learn it. It's good for the soul. And you could always come first.” I'm poking at him and I know it. From the way his eyes darken, he knows it too. That's right, I'm not going down as easily as you thought I would.

“Ah, Topolino, I always come first,” Tennant purrs as he darts toward me. Expecting it, I drop down, rolling to grab at his leg when he neatly jumps over me, but missing because the fucker is too fast. He laughs as I spring back up. “Is that all you've got? I've seen better from a kid.”

“Oh, Nocciola, we haven’t even started. Don’t count me out so soon,” I shoot back, unwilling to show him any fear.

Tennant shakes his head, amusement dancing in his eyes. “I’m more than happy if you want to eat me. My ass is ready. I must say, you certainly had some much better options when you were researching mice and their eating habits last night. Hazelnut works—though I didn’t know mice eat them. Points for translating it, though. Your porn choice was quite enlightening, as well. I’ll take it as a compliment.”

My jaw drops and I barely register as he strikes out at me, drawing blood again as my lip splits. Growling, I shake it off, coming at him one more. This time, I don’t hold back. There are no more weak punches, at least, in my opinion. From the way he’s laughing, he doesn’t agree.

Dancing backwards, I smile, blood dripping from my mouth. Fucking hell, this is fun. I go to attack again, and he’s waiting like normal. His hands come up to block a punch, and I use the distraction to sweep his legs out from under him. I’ve been only using my upper body for a reason. Like Lio taught me, let the enemy think you’re predictable. This time, I’m the one laughing.

I don’t give him any chance to spring back up, falling right on top of him. Fuck, his muscles do not make as soft of a landing as I thought they would.

I don’t even have a moment to gloat before he rolls us over, pinning me to the ground. I go to shove him off but he catches my hands, slamming them above my head. He kisses me, devouring me as he grinds his hard cock down onto mine. I’m only slightly shocked to feel how hard I am.

I give as good as I get until my mind catches up with my body. Ignacio . We’re not sexually exclusive, but we’ve never talked about exploring outside of the Family. Shouldn’t...

“FUCK!” I roar as I glare at Tennant, pain throbbing at the juncture of my neck and shoulder, from where the asshole bit me.

“Topolino, when you’re with me, you’re with me— only me. I’m not sharing you.” Tennant stops, cocking his head before continuing. “At least, not right now.”

“You think you’re in charge?” I whisper, waiting for him to lean in closer. He does exactly what I expect, dipping his head down to me. Without pausing, I slam my head against his. The pain ricochets through me, but it has the desired effect. He lets go of my hands, pushing up slightly as he wipes his forehead. It’s just enough space...

I bring my knee up hard, slamming it into his balls. It’s fighting dirty, but that’s the only way to fight. I slip out from under him, jumping back to my feet. When he stands up, there’s no more amusement in his expression. For a moment, fear shudders through me. The adrenaline coursing through my veins won’t let me stop and so I move forward, facing him. I may be headed to my death, but fuck if I’ll let it happen easily.

Growling, Tennant comes at me yet again, and this time, I don’t even have a second to process before my legs are kicked out from under me, and I somehow find myself kneeling with my arms locked behind my back. “Topolino, you just made a grave mistake.”

“Fucking. Worth. It,” I grit out as he puts more pressure on my arms, my shoulders protesting against it. I gasp when he lets go suddenly and shoves me down.

I go to get up—again—but he steps firmly on my back. I fight against it, but there’s no getting out of this one. I slap my hand against the floor in frustration.

“Have you figured out that you aren’t strong enough?” Tennant mocks me before asking, “Are you ready to take your punishment?”

“Fine,” I try to snap out, but it sounds reedy as he’s still pushing against my back.

He moves his leg off me and I inhale harshly. Exhaustion is beginning to sink in, but I refuse to allow it. I won’t show him anything other than my ability to not give up. He. Won’t. Break. Me.

“Stay down there—and beg.”

I roll over, staring right into his icy eyes. There’s fire there, despite their cold appearance. I want to play with it. I want it to fucking burn us both to ashes. He’s not hiding who he is, and I fucking love it.

“Punish me. Show me exactly where I belong.” I widen my legs, enjoying the snarl on his face, and because I can’t help myself, I add, “Under you, right?”

He slips off his shirt, throwing it aside, and I stare at him, cataloging every inch of him. Hell, this may be the only time I actually get to see him like this, with us being from different Families, and I want to remember this forever. I want to claim every moment of it.

“Oh, it’ll be under me. Undress.” I go to stand, but he shakes his head. “Stay down.”

I fight against rolling my eyes as I shimmy out of my clothes, while I continue laying on the training mats. Unoriginal. It doesn’t matter though, all I want is his hands on me, and his dick inside me.

By the time I’m fully undressed, he’s naked as well, and already stroking his cock. And damn, it’s fucking beautiful. The girth and length...I want every single inch. I clench my fists, wanting nothing more than to reach out for him, or to at least stroke myself, but I know neither are going to be allowed.

The approval lighting up his eyes says I chose correctly, and I force myself to relax. “What do you want me to do next?”

“Well, since you were so interested in eating me, Topolino...let’s see you choke on my cock. I need it nice and wet before I fuck you.”

My body flushes red, as my dick jerks in anticipation, and when he straddles my head, falling forward onto me, I open my mouth immediately. There’s no finesse and I. Fucking. Love. It.

There’s no consideration for me, and I moan around his dick as he punishes me, forcing me to take him completely. He doesn't stop until I’m about ready to pass out. It’s a damn good thing I don’t have a gag reflex, or I’d be choking on bile.

He’s like a panther, the perfect predator. He’s just the right side of crazy that he's able to draw me out, but still makes me feel safe to be myself. Hell, I didn’t think my cock could get any harder, until he started using me like I’m his property.

When he scrambles up, standing and towering over me again, I’m breathing hard, and my throat fucking hurts from the position he used. Each thrust harshly scraped the surface of my throat, but who the hell needs to breathe without pain?

He stares down at me, quirking his eyebrow. I gulp harshly and eye his spit-covered cock. This is going to hurt, I already know it. But I want it. I want him to hold me down, to fuck me into the floor, and show me where he thinks I belong. Because he can have this—for now.

“Are you going to do anything?” I taunt him, my voice scratchy but clear, smirking as I add, “Nocciola.”

“Topolino, I had no idea how much you enjoyed nicknames. Don’t worry, Baby



Mouse. I'll make sure you get more to eat later."

I probably shouldn't antagonize him as he kneels down between my legs, pushing them up roughly. I grab my knees, pulling them up and stretching out, to show my hole off completely. If he wants access, I'll give it to him. We can fight later.

He edges forward, guiding his cock into my completely unprepared hole. I clench my teeth as I stare into his eyes, trying to keep my body from tensing as he pushes into me. It's painful as fuck, and I wouldn't be surprised if something tears, because he isn't taking it easy.

Holy fuck.

A sheen of sweat covers me as I start to tremble, but once he bottoms out, he dips his head and kisses me. It's so incredibly soft compared to everything else. There's a whiplash to my emotions. Before I can process it, he's fucking me in long, unforgiving strokes.

My cock wilted from the pain, but when he starts pegging my prostate, it doesn't take too long for it to get interested again. One powerful thrust and I arch my back, moaning. The painful pleasure edges me closer. I go to grab my dick, but Tennant stops me.

"Topolino, I always come first. When I'm ready for you to come, I'll let you know." He lets go of my hand and circles my neck instead, squeezing just enough to make me aware he has complete control of my breath—of my life. "You like that, don't you?"

I don't answer—I can't. But everything in me is ablaze, and I give in and grab for him, dragging my nails down his body. He hisses as I draw blood, and he squeezes my neck a little more, but he also fucks me harder, so I do it again and again. Until

he's almost cut off my oxygen completely.

Our bodies slide together, as both of us are sweating now, and the blood mixes in, making me wish I could see it. I want to see him as he owns my body. I want to watch as I own his as well, because he may be the one in control of my breath, but I'm the one urging him further.

It doesn't take much longer before he's stuttering as he fucks me, his thrusts no longer smooth or coordinated, and I groan at it, waiting for him to finish, so he'll hopefully let me have my own climax. He throws his head back as he growls with his release, and his hold tightens until he cuts my air off completely. He stares down at me as I try to stop myself from panicking. He shudders and then finally lets me breathe. My eyes are wide and begging as tears stream down my face.

"Oh, Topolino, don't worry, I'll make sure you come." He pulls out of me and I wince from the soreness, as he leans forward, licking the tracks of my tears, adjusting my glasses after he's finished. He hums in satisfaction before gripping my cock. He begins to jack it off, hard and fast. "Fall apart for me. Show me how much you needed this. How much you need me. Not Ignacio. Me."

I gasp as I fly apart, almost hating him for mentioning Ignacio in that moment, but I can't feel anything other than the endorphins that are flooding my system. He strikes again, biting the same spot he did before, only this time, even harder. I manage to come even more as he licks the area, claiming me, and I melt bonelessly into the floor.

"Topolino."

"Nocciola."

"You forgot, we're still training." I open my mouth, but don't get a word out before

his fist hits me on the side of the head. I try to leverage myself up and away, but he just laughs, pouncing on me. “Haven't you learned to stay down?”

“Fuck. You.” I rasp out, my own punch weaker than ever.

“I think we learned it’s the opposite. But, if I ever want to go that route, I’ll let you know. Now. Stay. The. Fuck. Down.” I don’t see his fist coming, but pain explodes in my head again before everything goes black.

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:05 am*

Sitting back in my father's—my—office chair, I scrub my hands over my face until I'm seeing spots. A low-grade headache is knocking at my temples, and I wonder how Dad doesn't have more gray hair. I've only been running the Family for a few days, and yet I feel as if I've aged ten years.

There's a knock at the office door, and it opens shortly after. Removing my hands from my face, I expect to see Tennant, or maybe even Carter, with some type of update, but am surprised to see Jude instead.

"Hey." I smile at him. "What are you doing here?"

He takes a seat across from me, barely concealing his wince. Before replying, he removes his hearing aids and tosses them onto the desk, then says, "I was with Jayden. I swear I'm more sore now than I was before I saw him."

I snort, but understand exactly what he means. I also don't blame him for taking his hearing aids out as soon as he could. Jayden is...a lot. The sadistic bastard isn't bratty like Doc, but his bedside manner is just as bad, if not worse sometimes.

"What'd he say?"

Jude shrugs. "Same thing. He did say he thinks my range of motion has improved though, but he wants to put me through some more exercises to be sure. Only reason he didn't today was because Tennant told him he needed me." Jude snorts and his hands flutter for a moment, as if he's thinking about how to continue.

"What is Tennant doing?" I ask. "I thought he was taking you and Benjamin to

interrogate the cops that Joel tracked down?”

He huffs. “He said he was going to test Benjamin’s hand-to-hand abilities while I was at my appointment.”

“Okay...” I voice the word, drawing it out because I’m confused as to why Jude looks smug as hell over that.

“I assume,” he replies, his hands moving slower than usual as he does. “By now, Ten has either killed him or fucked him.”

My mouth drops open and my hands fall to my lap in shock. I...did not expect this turn of events. I mean, I know Benjamin is like fucking catnip to Ten, but I didn’t expect the new Second to just go for it. To be honest, I always thought Benjamin was an uptight snob.

I’m not sure how he and Lio are best friends, but well, it looks like he has hidden depths—more than he’s already shown.

“Are you really that shocked, Tesoro Mio?” Jude asks, tilting his head.

“Yeah...” I nod my fist and then hesitantly sign, “I knew they were into one another, and that Ten would go for it if given the opportunity. I just never expected Benjamin to give him one, is all. He seems like a one man type of person to me.”

Jude snorts. “Even I know better than that, Roman. I think you’re letting the fact he doesn’t like you cloud your judgment.”

I sigh and nod. “Probably right. Maybe this will make him not hate me? I mean, he can fuck my lover, then I can be friends with Lio without him breathing over my shoulder, right?”

Jude rolls his eyes. “From what I’ve been told, and what I’ve seen, he’s loyal to his Family, and very protective. You are...a lot. I’m not surprised he wants to protect Emilio from you. Especially since the two of you are so much alike. It’s hard being the outsider in this, Roman. He just wants to keep what he’s built.”

Biting my lip, I look at our past interactions in a new light. I...guess I can see that. Lio and I get along great, and have a lot of fun together. We share similar interests when it comes to killing those who deserve it, and I suppose that can be intimidating to Benjamin, who keeps his homicidal urges buried deep, deep down.

Though, from the sounds of it, Tennant is working on breaking those walls down. If anyone can, it’s our resident sociopathic psychopath. He always knows the right buttons to push, and even if you think you’ve gotten one over on him, you’ve actually just played right into his hands.

I just hope Benjamin knows this isn’t a one and done, not for us.

Jude raps his knuckles on the desk, getting my attention. “Stop thinking about it. Yes, while it might be surprising that Benjamin is the one who somehow gets under Tennant’s skin, it’s not important right now. Hollis cleared it, which is enough for now. If there needs to be more of a conversation about it, we’ll have one.”

I look at him curiously. “Yesterday, I thought you were going to throw up a jealous, possessive protest. What changed?”

He shrugs. “I don’t do jealousy. If I did, I wouldn’t be with the three of you. No...I was simply concerned because I don’t know the Martellis as well as you do. Hollis and I talked, and he reminded me that I’m his...yours.”

“If I could,” I sign slowly. “I’d kill your family all over again for giving you so many doubts about your place in the world. The four of us...we’re everything. Benjamin

and Tennant might be...whatever they are, but that has no bearings on what the four of us do together. Especially since I don't know if Hollis could let that much control go, in order for them to be a separate entity. I highly doubt Lio would appreciate it if he knew his best friend was claimed, not only by Ten, but Hol, too."

Jude chuckles. "Yeah... Let's not test that theory." He sobers, his face going eerily blank. Looks like he's been taking more than "how to be a Second" lessons from Ten. "What's happening on the streets?"

"Shit," I sign, sighing and running a hand through my hair, tugging hard at the strands. "I did manage to get the weapons delivery pushed back a few more days, so we can get some protections in place. It's going to cost us a pretty steep pay cut, but safety is more important than money right now." My hands tremble slightly as the weight of reality and all I've learned today rushes to the surface, trying to take over.

"The re-supply went out without a hitch. Everyone got what they needed, and dispersed it to their dealers. Except...some of the street dealers were caught selling."

"Fuck," he curses aloud.

"Pretty much," I agree. "They won't turn on us; they know better. But it's still a problem. If I were the LEOs, I'd go after the little fish, offer them a deal...and let them lead the authorities straight to who they actually want."

Jude nods in agreement. "Make sure our people stay vigilant. Anyone who got picked up and then is let go needs to be carefully monitored. I'd advise against moving on them. Any aggression on our part will be proof enough for them to dig their claws deeper into our business. So, put people on them, and have them report anything that seems suspicious. Then we can do something about it."

I grin at him. "I knew you were a good Second for a reason. Sinclair suggested the

same thing. He's been watching the situation, along with the Martelli lawyer, though he's not touching any of them."

"Smart. The cops know who our lawyer is. And while people like Ricci, who hold large territories and are at the top of the food chain, can justify having a fancy lawyer, the street dealers can't."

"Exactly. Other than that, I've been going over what Carter, Enzo, and Marcus have been doing. Though I'm not needed much there, the three of them have a handle on the men, and know where to focus our attention. Lio's stand-in Second, Antonio, had some good ideas on how to direct their operations, and I gave Enzo the go-ahead to implement similar measures. Tennant or Joel will have to approve it, but I have faith in them all."

"And we have faith in you, Tesoro Mio," he says.

Emotion clogs my throat, but thankfully, I don't need to speak out loud. "I just want to make Dad proud."

"You are," he assures me. "When we get him back, and he sees how well you've held everything together, he'll tell you just how proud you've made him. You were born for this, Roman. It shows, too. From the way you speak, how you hold yourself, and even the way you dress." I scoff but he ignores me. "Yes, it may be unconventional for someone in your position, but you own your style and sense of self, and that confidence is what helps people not question it. I know you don't feel ready, but you are. You've been ready since the day you spared my life."

Tears fill my eyes and I don't bother blinking them away, knowing I'm safe here with him. "Thank you." My hand trembles as it tips off my chin, but I don't care anymore. Pushing down my emotions is something I've struggled to do my whole life, knowing a Boss isn't supposed to show just how vulnerable he is.



If there's one thing I've learned since Dad was taken, it's that emotions are part of the job, even if those not at the top don't think they should be. It's learning how to express them, and when, that's important. Locked here in Dad's office, with Jude sitting in front of me, I know I'm as safe as can be.

My phone vibrates on the desk and I wipe my eyes before picking it up. Glancing at the screen, a pit of dread fills me.

HOLLIS

Our bedroom. Now.

Looking up, I find Jude slipping his own phone in his pocket. "I'm assuming Tennant is finished," he muses. He grabs his hearing aids and slips them back in before standing. "Shall we?"

Taking a deep breath, I push away from the desk, slipping my phone into my jacket. I straighten my skirt, making sure the pleats lay just so, before following Jude out of the office.

The presence of extra guards in the halls sets me on edge—more than I already was since Hollis's text.

In any other circumstance, I'd be worried he was pissed, but he gave his blessing for whatever occurred between Tennant and Benjamin, so whatever this is, it must be big enough for a private conversation.

We use the elevator, because after a session with Jayden, Jude isn't up for taking the stairs. He grabs my hand once we're in the car and doesn't let go, even as we walk down the hall to our room.

The suite door is open and Tennant is already there, sitting on the couch, one leg crossed over the other.

We leave the door open and I take a seat next to Ten as Jude sits in a chair. “You look well fucked.” I can’t help but comment.

Tennant snorts. “I am.”

I eye his shoulders and arms, noting how blood seeps through his white shirt. “I see he’s not a docile little mouse,” I muse.

Tennant smirks and shakes his head. “Far from it. He plays the act well, but he’s a Martelli for a reason.”

“You’re right, Roman,” Jude drawls. “Fucking catnip.”

“Will you two fucking stop with that,” Tennant snaps, frustration bleeding into his tone. It’s not an easy feat to make him lose control, which means he cares far more for Benjamin than he’ll ever admit.

I wait for jealousy to spark, since Benjamin isn’t ours to keep, but it doesn’t. I’m not surprised, as I’ve never been jealous of any of the individual relationships that happen outside the main one between the four of us, but I never thought about how it’d feel if an outsider was thrown into the equation. Except now, we have to think about it.

Hollis finally comes into the room and shuts the door behind him. The click of the lock is loud in my ears, even as my heart beats quicker at seeing him. He’s wearing a black dress shirt, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, which is surprising as he’s very conscious to not show his scars. His dark hair is its usual messy disarray, but it’s his dark brown eyes, framed by his glasses, that are captivating.

The air in the room feels electric as Hollis leans against the closed suite door and studies the three of us. “I want you and Jude to watch this,” he says, holding out his tablet. “And then I’ll tell you what I’ve decided.”

Fear creeps into my throat as I look at Ten, who is watching our hacker, the trepidation in his ice blue eyes is the only indication of what he might be thinking.

Getting up, I take the tablet from Hollis and perch on the arm of Jude’s chair, holding the device between us. “There’s sound,” Hollis says from his spot still by the door. “So make sure the captions are turned on.”

Doing as ordered, I finally press play, furrowing my brows when I see it’s a recording of the training room we have here at the house. It’s only ever used when we’re on lockdown, as we are now, or if we’re bored enough, as Tennant prefers more space than the room can offer. Plus, there are only limited skills he can test here.

The training session starts out as expected. Tennant taunts Benjamin, using his experience with that psychotic bastard, Jax, as a way to bring out the bloodlust hiding in the other man.

I have to bite my tongue to not comment on how sloppy Benjamin’s technique is, especially when he allows himself to be backed into the wall. The sight of Tennant leaning in to kiss him has my breath catching.

Jude taps the screen, splitting the feed as he brings up the view from the other camera, just in time to watch as Tennant takes Benjamin’s trauma, and uses it to build him up.

The next time they go at it, I can see Benjamin is actually trying. There’s a determination on his face that is admirable, especially as he manages to get Ten on the ground, though he gets too arrogant for how undertrained he is.

When Tennant has him on the ground, his foot holding him to the mat, my cock thickens. It becomes hard to focus as I watch Tennant own Benjamin on the screen. By the time they're both naked, and Tennant is ready to shove into Benjamin without lube or prep, my cock is rock-hard, and my body is almost overheated with desire.

When Tennant knocks Benjamin out, my heart is racing and I ache all over from the need to be fucked.

"Where's Benjamin now?" I ask, concerned about Tennant knocking him unconscious then just leaving him. I know he wouldn't do that, but still... I also know how it feels to go up against Ten, and that's after years and years of training. I'm sure Benjamin is feeling every hit, since the fucker never pulls his punches.

"In his room. I asked Soren to sit in with him, so he wouldn't wake up disoriented and alone."

I nod, the worry easing a bit.

Jude takes the tablet from me and leans forward to set it on the coffee table. "What was the point of that?" he asks, his voice thick and laced with desire.

Hollis finally pushes away from the door and comes to sit in the chair opposite the one Jude and I are sharing. "The point," he says slowly, "was to show you what Tennant got up to today."

"Are you going to punish me for taking what you freely gave, Tesoro?" Tennant asks in a mild tone, though there's something lying underneath the carefully modulated words that has my desire receding, and fear taking center stage.

In all my time of knowing Hollis, he and Ten have always been on the same page. Even when they disagree, they somehow manage to make it seem like they're one

unit. Right now, there's a tension in the air, one that fills my lungs with fear and makes my heart beat fast.

Jude slips his hand into mine and I hold it tightly, grateful to have a lifeline in the maelstrom.

"No," Hollis finally says. "I am not cruel like that. What I want to know is...do you plan on giving him back?"

"No," Tennant replies. "The thought didn't cross my mind."

"Isn't he engaged to one of them?" Jude asks. "That pretty much means you have to."

Tennant sneers. "Ignacio doesn't deserve him. He's half-trained because Ignacio failed him. Il Padrone and Lio have a Family to run, they can't be everywhere at once. Benjamin is Ignacio's, which means he's his responsibility. That he didn't take care of him shows he must not really love him as he says."

"That's unfair," I snap. "People show love in different ways. You know exactly what that's like. Just because Ignacio was taking his time with Benjamin, doesn't mean he didn't care."

"It's exactly what it means, Little Prince," Ten argues. "The second Hollis became mine, I started working with him. He'll never be as proficient at fighting as the rest of us, but he's shown he's more than willing to kill and die for the Family. His position means he doesn't need such a heavy hand as you or Jude."

"Benjamin is Emilio's Second. He should have started training the moment he was appointed. Not only that...it's not just sex."

I squeeze Jude's hand harder in mine. I saw and heard that on the video. The

Martellis use sex as a way to connect to one another, and to keep each other in their places. While I'm sure they all care for one another in some way, because love isn't stagnant, I know their individual relationships are what matter—much like our relationship can't be impacted by what Hollis did to and with Lio.

What I saw on the video, however... Tennant and Benjamin have a connection that goes far deeper than one-time sex, or a simple release, or Benjamin being Tennant's type. It...was like watching Hollis and Tennant having sex, if I'm being honest. The...trust and care between them matched what I've seen between my lovers.

Sex is just sex... That was more.

“That’s why I’m going to let you keep him, Love.” Hollis’s voice jars me back to the topic at hand.

“What do you mean?” I ask. “I mean, I’m happy that Tennant seems to have found someone else who’s perfect for him, but Benjamin hates me, remember?”

“Good thing you’re not part of my decision then, Amore,” Hollis says. “Benjamin is his problem, not ours. I’ll let you keep him, Ten. He’s yours. I’ll protect him because you are mine, and I’ll always protect what’s important to you, but I also don’t want Emilio breathing down my neck because he’s terrified for his best friend’s life.

“Roman is right that Benjamin isn’t a fan of his, but maybe him being around more will help with that. It’ll give him a chance to get to know Jude, too.” Hollis shrugs. “I didn’t plan for this when I gave you permission to fuck him, but...you’ve never asked me for anything.”

“I’m yours, Hol,” Tennant says in a voice I’ve never heard from him before. Sounding almost vulnerable.

“You are,” Hollis agrees. “And nothing will ever change that, but... I want you to have this— him —too.”

Tennant goes to his knees in front of Hollis and says something so quietly that not even I can hear it. Hollis grabs a handful of Ten’s white blond hair and pulls his head back.

“You’ll make it up to me,” Hollis tells him. “When this shitstorm is over, I’ll take you away for a while, maybe a few weeks, and show you just how mine you are. For now...” Hollis leans over Tennant and kisses him hard.

When the kiss ends, Tennant says, “I’ll be yours forever, Tesoro. Sei il mio universo.”

Hollis gives him an indulgent smile. “Sei la persona a cui tengo di più. Which is why I’m giving you this. Because I know nothing will ever stand in the way of you being mine.”

Jude tugs on my hand and I look at him, realizing that, even with his hearing aids, they’re speaking too low for him to understand. Extracting my hand from his, I quickly translate what they’re saying.

I feel no guilt for intruding on their private moment. If they didn’t want us to know, they would have gone to the other room.

“We can’t take him away from the Martellis forever,” Hollis says loud enough for us all to hear, as he releases Tennant’s hair. “Emilio is his best friend, and I’d rather not step on any toes, plus, there’s Ignacio.” Tennant makes a noise of disdain, but Hollis ignores him. “We also have to ask Benjamin how he feels, what he wants. I know what I saw on the video...but we can’t just kidnap him.”

“I have a feeling he’d like Ten’s brand of kidnapping. Plus, he kidnapped Lio, so...” I helpfully point out.

I also get ignored as Hollis continues. “This will be a very delicate balance for us all, especially since he’ll only be Tennant’s to play with, unless they decide to share. But...if he wants the same things you do, Love, then we’ll figure it out.”

Tennant reaches for Hollis and pulls him down for a kiss. “Thank you, Hol.”

Hollis smirks. “Don’t thank me for giving you what you need, Love. Especially not when that thing is a Martelli.”

Worry, fear, and excitement all run through me at the idea of Benjamin and Tennant being more than a convenient fuck for one another.

This is not how any of it was supposed to go when we joined forces with the Martellis to rescue the Bosses, but...I can’t say I hate it. I just hope it doesn’t blow up in our faces.



*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:05 am*

“ You pulled a couple of stitches,” Dr. Ranlen says, as she examines my back while I sit on the examination table, her hands lightly touching around the areas where Hollis enjoyed himself a little too much. “That Amato doctor is definitely talented. Even if you did pull a couple, it’s extremely well done. I’m assuming he needs to be if they play this rough.”

I want to shrug, but considering she’s working on my back, I decide that’s a really bad idea. “At least I got what I needed.”

“Hmm. True. But I’ll feel better when Il Padrone is back and you can get it in a more...safer way.” Dr. Ranlen laughs lightly at that. I bet she never thought she’d consider what Master and I do as safe. But Hollis definitely put something into perspective, even if he did help silence the chaos in my head. “Do you plan on engaging in this in the future? If so, I may want to talk to their doctor.”

Rolling my eyes, even though she can’t see me, I respond, “It’s not like we made any plans, but who knows. It may depend on how much I piss him off.”

I hear the snick of latex gloves being pulled off, and Dr. Ranlen moves in front of me. “Don’t take unnecessary risks. Not with everything that we have going on. If you need help with anything, let me know. I’m willing to step out of my normal role to get Allesandro back. I owe him. Always.”

“You know he doesn’t think of it that way. At least, not anymore. Your ex needed to die. I would have joined in, had I already been here.” My disgruntled tone makes her smile and shake her head.

“I have no doubts about that. But—” I hold up my hand, cutting her off when my phone pings with a message from Hollis.

“Sorry.” I cringe at cutting her off, but Hollis sending me a message has me instantly suspicious. “Hmm. He sent me an attachment.”

I immediately open it and push play.

“Holy shit,” Dr. Ranlen whispers as she moves to get a better view. “Are they fighting or fucking? And why is Benjamin so bad?”

“He’s not. He’s playing with Tennant.” I don’t answer her first question, because I’m just as curious. I wanted Tennant to bring out violence in Benjamin—to make him understand it’s a good thing to be bloodthirsty. However, I did not expect it to be like this. “Oh, damn. That’s... Wow. That’s going to change things.”

“The way they’re fucking? Yeah, I’d say it’ll change things.” Dr. Ranlen’s voice is frosty, and I finally remember that she’s always worked closely with Benjamin. This can’t be easy to see, especially when her loyalty is to our family.

“Uh.” I try to think of something positive to say as I squirm in my seat, praying my erection isn’t visible. But, damn. That’s fucking hot. Who knew Benjamin could be such a firecracker? Or maybe it’s just Tennant that drags it out of him. “Oh, fuck!”

“He. Knocked. Benjamin. Out. After they did...what they did. And this is the type of training you think Benjamin should be undergoing?”

“Well, Tennant had a point,” I weakly defend him. “They are still training. Benjamin knows not to drop his guard. I’ve taught him that.”

Dr. Ranlen glares at me, and I forget that out of everyone, she makes me the most

nervous. Her and her fucking scalpels. Plus, she's seen me at my worst. I try to think of anything to diffuse the situation, but nothing is coming to me. She throws her hands up in disgust.

"At least I know their doctor is talented. But if you both are going to be interacting with the Amatos like this, I need to sit down with their doctor. Obviously, we need a game plan."

"I think that's fair," I say carefully, watching her for any signs she's going for a scalpel. When she rolls her eyes and shoos me off the table, I exhale deeply.

I go to leave but she grips my arm, stalling me. I turn my head to meet her eyes, and there's a grimness there that almost takes me aback. "Are you going to show Ignacio?"

Fuck . I hadn't even thought about that. Chuckling evilly, I respond, "Yes. Yes, I am."

Dr. Ranlen drops my arm as if it's electrified, and I don't need to meet her eyes any longer to know she disapproves. But, fuck that. I'm not being a shit stirrer on this one. I need my best friend here. I need him as a Second, and as the voice of reason. The problem is...will he want to come back after what I just saw? That means I need to know what the fuck is going on with Ignacio and him. Sometimes love doesn't work out, and it sucks, but sometimes, a kick in the ass is what's needed.

I glance at my phone again, checking the time. Nodding to myself, I quickly jog to the gym, as I know that's where he'll be. The door bangs open when I enter and Ignacio startles, staring at me cautiously.

"Did you need something, Boss?"

Considering his ass is most likely still hurting, I understand his hesitation. Too bad, I'm going to teach him yet another lesson. I gesture for him to stop the treadmill he's on, and once he steps off, I toss my phone to him. He manages to catch it, despite being sweaty.

"Press play on the video. And don't say anything until it's finished."

I take in every facial twitch as he watches the video, from confusion to rage, to devastation. By the end, his face is pale and tears drip from his eyes. His whole body shakes as he looks up at me.

"Why did you show it to me?" His voice is thick, clogged from the tears he can't hold back.

"Because I need you to know what's happening. And what could happen. They've obviously connected. You know that love has to be tended to, and it goes both ways. You've shown lately that you don't have much faith in Benjamin. I don't want to lose my best friend and Second because your relationship is fucking us up. Right now, he could walk to the Amatos. So this is where you tell me what the fuck is going on, and what your plans are for the future. And yes, your feelings on this matter as well." I plop down onto the floor, thankful for the training mats.

He pinches his nose as he drops as well, leaning against the treadmill. "Alright, I screwed up. I'll be honest about that. After Jax...I didn't know what to do. I wanted to protect him, so I kept him a little more sheltered than I should have. I wasn't letting him in as often. And then when Il Padrone was kidnapped and he stepped up... I didn't take that well. You know that. I tried to put him in his place, and while he may have enjoyed it, we clearly didn't resolve the issues. It's not something that's easily resolvable with one conversation after months of confusion. I don't blame him for connecting with someone else. Plus, you know none of us are sexually exclusive. I just never imagined he'd have such a very obvious connection with someone else.

Especially Tennant.”

The last words are whispered, and I do feel for him. I don’t get why he didn’t trust my best friend, but I do feel for the fact he’s in pain. “Do you still love him? And think carefully, don’t just give me a knee-jerk answer.”

Swallowing, he stares at the floor, and eventually, he raises his eyes to meet mine. There’s a fire and determination in them, and I almost melt with relief. “Yes, I do. And I’ll do whatever I need to do to prove it.”

“Even if it means having to share him? With more than just us,” I clarify quickly.

Ignacio swallows roughly, tightening his hands into fists before relaxing them. “Even if I have to share him with that fucking psychopath. I want Benjamin to be happy. Preferably with me, but yes, I know what I saw in that video. He may no longer choose me.”

Thank fuck I don’t have to point that out. I’m about all emotion out. “Then we’re on the same page. I want you to be very careful on how you approach Benjamin when he comes back. If you start immediately with accusations, you’ll lose him.”

“I understand. Thanks. I know this isn’t your typical thing.” I grumble at his appreciation. I hope to fuck he never expects this again.

“I’m not doing it for you. I’m doing it for my best friend. There’s no way I’m losing him to the fucking Amatos. He kidnapped me as a friend, he can’t leave me now.”

Ignacio gives a startled laugh and shakes his head. I relax when he smiles slightly. He stands up and offers me his hand. I let him pull me up, even though I don’t need the help.

“One thing...” he says, and I gesture for him to continue. “I hope you know that I’m going to punch Tennant. He didn’t need to knock Benjamin out.”

I stare at him, unable to speak, before slowly looking up at the ceiling, praying for patience. None comes.

Giving him my attention, I speak slowly. “You... You want to take on Tennant? Their strongest asset. Who, yes, fought dirty, but that’s how you should fight. You taught me that.”

“He deserves it.” Ignacio thrusts his chin up, rolling his shoulders back. I know this isn’t a fight I’m going to win, so I just wave it away.

“Whatever. Good luck. Maybe he won’t kill you. Just make sure you don’t fuck up your chance with Benjamin.”

With that, I spin on my heel and head for the door. Now I need to track down Marcus and Jenna. Oh, and call Hollis. That first. I want to make sure our records are safe, and most of all, I want to know what the hell he thinks about all of this. He’s got a harem of his own, and that includes Tennant. I want to make sure he hasn’t killed my Second...

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:05 am*

When Roman goes back to work, he drags Jude with him, leaving Tennant and me alone, which I very much take advantage of.

Gripping his hair tightly, I pull his head back, exposing his throat to me. “I’ve changed my mind,” I say simply. “I want you to show me how much you belong to me.”

Tennant’s eyes darken, the icy blue turning molten. “Whatever you want, Tesoro. I’m yours.”

I hum. “You are, aren’t you.” Leaning down, I lick up his throat, before biting it in the same spot where he bit me once.

When I taste blood, I bite a little harder, enjoying the way Tennant’s breath hitches. Finally releasing him, I admire my handy work. Unlike when he almost tore my throat out—literally—he won’t scar, but the mark will be a prominent feature on his throat for a while, letting everyone know who he belongs to.

“Undress and then get on the bed. I want you spread out for me.”

As soon as I release him, he does as ordered, not hesitating in the slightest. My cock pulses at the sight of this man doing as I command without any hesitation. I know how dominant Tennant is, how much he likes control; I’ve seen it be exerted on both our lovers, and now his new pet.

But with me...he’s been nothing but conscious and considerate of my needs. Even when he restricts my air until I pass out, or bites me until I scar. Tennant has given

me everything I've ever wanted, and never asked for anything in return. The least I could do was gift him a boyfriend.

Following Ten into the bedroom, I watch as he shucks his clothes, tossing them over the dresser before laying on his back on the bed.

"So beautiful," I compliment, taking my time to watch him as I undress.

The heat in his gaze makes my blood buzz, and the anticipation of having this man under me rushes through my veins. Climbing onto the bed, I spread Tennant's legs wide and lean over him, tracing the already-scabbing-over marks on his arms and chest. "I see your new pet is feisty."

Tennant laughs. "He gives as good as he gets, that's for sure."

Leaning down, I lick across one of the deeper scratches, cleaning up the dried blood. Moving up to his mouth, I kiss him deeply, sharing the taste of his blood between us, fucking his mouth like I am going to fuck his ass.

"Watching you with him gives me all types of delicious ideas," I whisper against his lips.

"What type of ideas?"

Pulling back, I sit between his spread legs and set my hands on his thighs, watching as he grips the sheets in his hands to prevent himself from reaching for me. "The kind you'll find out about when I'm good and ready. For now... trust me."

He sucks in a breath. "I do, Hol. I trust you with my life."

"Good." Removing my hands from his thighs, I set them on his shoulders, digging



my nails into his flesh. He flinches but doesn't protest.

Dragging my hands down his chest, I leave marks parallel to the ones Benjamin left behind. Over and over again, I mark him up, leaving deep red lines along his torso. Some of the scratches go deep, drawing blood, and Tennant hisses, reveling in the sting.

"Grab the lube," I tell him.

He sits up enough to reach over into the drawer for the bottle, but before he closes it, I say, "And the knife."

Both things are tossed onto the bed as Tennant lays back down. I coat my fingers first, tracing them over his hole, spreading one leg out wider for better access. Tennant lifts his hips as I rub a finger around his hole, entering him shallowly with it. When I shove two fingers inside him, he moans.

"I quite liked watching you take Benjamin apart," I tell him, reaching over for the knife. "Tell me how it felt."

His breath stutters as I trace the flat of the knife up and down his hard cock. He tries to thrust up into the sensation, but I pull the knife away and remove my fingers from his hole.

"Give me what I want, Love, and I'll reward you."

"It... He...he's perfect. So contrary. There are two sides to him, and when he lets his barriers down and allows both to play...it's addictive."

Running the blade down his cock, I nick the skin a little, enjoying how he flinches, and the way blood slides down his hard flesh.

“When I let you play with him,” I say, “I expected you to fuck him and get it out of your system...” I make another shallow cut at the base of his dick. “But that’s not what I saw.”

“No...” he trails off as I slide three fingers into his ass. “He is...so much more than I expected.”

“You want to keep him.” It’s not a question, just a statement of fact that’s already been discussed.

“He fits in here. I know he’s not Roman’s biggest fan...” He gasps as I brush my fingers against his prostate, even as I drag the knife along his balls. “But I think he’ll thrive. Chaos is smothering him.”

I hit him with the knife, the tip of the blade nicking his thigh and causing blood to well up. “It’s not your place to comment on someone else’s relationship.”

“It’s the truth. I understand he’s Emilio’s Second and best friend; I’m willing to share with him. But like hell do I trust Ignacio to take care of him.”

Sliding my fingers out of his ass, I stretch myself out over him, my cock brushing against his open and waiting hole. “I’ll let you have him. He can be your lover, your boyfriend, or whatever you wanna call it; but you must respect his place.”

Kissing him before he can protest, I surge up onto my knees, sliding the head of my dick along his hole. Pulling back, I grip my cock and bring it to his waiting entrance. Tennant plants his feet on the bed, widening his stance and giving me plenty of room as I enter him slowly.

“Consent is important here, Ten. You can kidnap him later, after we get the Bosses back—after I have my way with you. But...something tells me there’s more to his

relationship with Ignacio. Listen to him, and respect whatever decision he comes to.”

Driving myself in to the hilt, I once more trace the knife along his balls, watching as his body goes rigid on instinct.

So very carefully, I fuck him as I hold the knife to his sac, enjoying the sweet, measured cries that escape his throat.

“I’m...still going to kick Chaos’s ass,” Tennant says breathlessly as I remove the knife from his balls.

I laugh while dropping the knife onto the bed, and begin fucking him in earnest. “I know. You’re not allowed to kill him.”

Tennant reaches for me finally, and I barely have time to prepare before he’s flipping us over, my breath whooshing out as I hit the bed. Tennant swings himself into my lap, knife in hand. As he sits on my cock, he brings the knife to my throat, making me swallow reflexively.

“I make no promises, Tesoro. I’ll listen to what Benjamin wants, because you’re right, he has a choice. Especially since he’s a Martelli, but...I’m not worried. I won’t ask him to leave Ignacio for me.” He leans over, forcing my dick deeper inside him. Against my lips, he whispers, “But I won’t talk him out of it, either.”

He begins fucking himself faster on my cock, while at the same time, he cuts my throat, just under the scar that's already there, making me moan in pleasure. Tennant smirks, knowing how much I get off on the threat of death. And so he holds the blade to my throat as he fucks himself, stealing my breath from me.

Setting my hands on his hips, I dig my nails in hard enough to make him bleed. Tennant’s ass contracts around me as the blood flows from us both, and I whine when

the knife is taken away.

He wraps his hand around my throat, slowly restricting my breath, even as I start lifting my hips up with every one of his downward thrusts. The more he cuts off my air, the harder my cock gets.

Tennant leans down and kisses me harshly, stealing the last of my breath as he cuts my air off completely, leaving me helpless beneath him. Spots dance in my vision and my lungs beg for air.

As my thoughts go foggy and I claw at Tennant, silently asking to breathe, he grinds his ass on my dick, fisting his hard length, even as my vision grays and I am on the verge of passing out.

I'm barely aware of the way he shakes over me, his hot cum splattering across my chest.

When he removes his hand, I suck in a much-needed breath, but get light-headed as he didn't take it slow when he eased the pressure off, but released me all at once, making my head spin.

I close my eyes and try to get myself under control, even as my cock pulses and cum erupts from it, coating his insides.

Tennant moves to lay next to me, pulling me in close as I catch my breath. When my heart rate settles, and I can breathe without gasping, I turn in his arms.

"I love you," I whisper. "I trust you...like I trust no other. Outside of my siblings, you were the first person I let get close to me. I love Roman and Jude, too; there's not a unit of measurement for the way I love any of you. But...you're mine in a way I can't—won't even try to—explain, Tennant."

He threads his fingers through my hair and pulls my head back, forcing me to look at him. “I know. I am honored to have such trust from you, and I’ll never abuse it.”

I nod. “You’ve never given me any reason to doubt you—even when you kissed Roman without talking to me first. I...I want you to have this. I don’t know how it’ll work, but it will work, because I’ll burn the world down for you.”

He grins at that. “Same.” Kissing me, he lingers, as if savoring the feel and taste of me. “We’ll figure this out, together.”

“We always do.”

My phone ringing brings us back to reality, and I groan. I want to ignore it so badly, but we’re up to our necks in shit, and none of us can afford to slack off, interpersonal relationships tangling and detangling themselves aside.

Tennant gets off the bed and fishes my phone out of my pants, frowning when he glances at the screen. “It’s Emilio.”

I curse and hold my hand out for the device, which he tosses to me. “I’ll deal with him, why don’t you go check in on your boyfriend?”

He snorts. “You seriously gonna call him that?”

I shrug. “Either that or pet, both are apt, I think. Now, go.” I answer the phone just before the call ends. “What can I do for you, Cucciolo?”

“I need to ask for a...favor.”

He’s careful with his words, making sure to not sound desperate, though there’s an edge of stress in his voice. Whether that’s from whatever this “favor” is, or because

of the video I sent him, I don't know, and it doesn't matter.

"That'll cost you," I reply mildly.

Tennant smirks at me as he dresses in a fresh suit. He enjoys watching me play with the boy, as much as I enjoy doing it.

Emilio growls. "I'm aware. Name your price."

"I can't until I know what the favor is..."

"I need to know how to keep our network safe from the police," he says, not quite snapping, but I can almost see the short fuse his patience is on. "We both know you're better at that type of thing. So, please, will you help us with keeping our records, and all that, safe?"

I hum, drawing the moment out a little. "I usually charge a pretty penny for that type of work. It's not a quick or easy task. And with so many other things going on..."

"We can pay," he says quickly.

"I know. And you will, but not with money... Well, not just with money." I make sure to add some suggestion into my tone, and Tennant chuckles as he leans over and kisses me quickly before leaving the room. I hope he'll take my advice and check on Benjamin. Poor kid just had his world turned upside down, and his ass kicked by Tennant, he could do with some TLC.

"I'll need access to your network, either by physically getting into it myself, or having you transmit it remotely to me. I'd prefer the latter...I have a special USB for that. It'll take me a few days, possibly three or four, depending on how big your network is, and how complex I build up the protections."

“As long as it gets done. We’ve thrown around the possibility of them coming for the house. I wouldn’t put it past them to somehow obtain a warrant.”

“No,” I say lowly. “Me either.” It’s a theory I’ll have to run by Roman, too. “That means it’s especially important to get this done... I’d rather not risk a back and forth with the USB, so I’ll come to you and get started. Once I’m patched into your network, I can work from anywhere.” I grin. “I’ll collect the non-monetary payment while I’m there.”

He curses but says, “My doctor won’t like you tearing me to ribbons so soon.”

“Oh, don’t worry, Cucciolo, I’ve learned a lot in my time with Ten—I don’t need a knife to give you what we both want.”

“Speaking of my doctor, she wants to connect with yours. Something about them both being on the same page so they can cater to our medical needs.”

I frown. There’s a reason Cristian doesn’t let Doc out in public, he’s an...acquired taste. “You’ll have to talk to Tennant or his bodyguard about that. They’re in charge of personnel, but...she’s probably right to ask for that.”

“Good. So, you’ll be over when?”

“Give me a few hours. I need to do a few more things here, and get Leandro’s current task on an automated system, so he can start building a kill-switch for you. If they somehow do manage to get a warrant, it’ll be better if you can remotely destroy everything, rather than risk the possibility they might have a decent hacker. I can protect the sensitive files, but even breaking through one or two won’t end well for you.”

“Okay...” He hesitates, and then asks, “How’s Benjamin doing?”

I smirk. “Why don’t you call him later? Ask for yourself? He’s allowed to use his devices when he’s not in training. I know that’s not what you’re really asking though. Don’t worry, Cucciolo, he’s not in any danger from me. I find it...endearing that he and Tennant have connected. You should be happy for him.”

Emilio sighs. “I’ll hold back judgment until I speak with him but, thank you.”

“Don’t thank me for making my love happy.”

“Right, well...I’ll see you soon.”

“Yes, you will.” I hang up and let out a breath.

Touching the cut at the base of my throat, I let the slight sting propel me forward, now that the afterglow of sex is gone. Yet another thing has been added to my plate, but the promise of spending more time with Emilio...and getting to try new lines of security on the Martellis’ network, will be fun.

Climbing out of bed, I rinse the blood off my throat and collarbones, pleased to see the cut has stopped bleeding. The bruises around my neck are already starting to darken, and I smile at the sight. Running a hand through my hair, I decide trying to tame it is pointless. Dressing in a lightweight sweater and charcoal trousers, I tug the sleeves over my scars and then grab my phone from the bed.

My shoulders are already tightening up with the added stress, and presumably long days, but I leave the bedroom anyway. I have a Boss to update, lovers to reassure, once they learn I plan on leaving the house, and a son to corral. I’m exhausted just thinking about it all.

Cristian, next time you get kidnapped, take me with you...



*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:05 am*

I pace the length of my office, my skin itching at the very thought of what may happen. None of this is working the way it should. And why the hell did I not notice something was going on with Benjamin? Fuck . I need him back soon. A call is not enough to sort this shit out.

There's a knock on the door and I call out for them to enter, my throat dry. I almost breathe a sigh of relief when I see it's Marcus and Ignacio. I sit behind my desk as they address me.

"Hey, Antonio mentioned setting up some blinds? I have a map, and I've pinpointed a few of the best options. Keegan felt Jenna out on it as well. She's in favor, but suggested that we make sure some of our higher-ranking men are being seen there as well."

"That sounds like a good plan. Ignacio, I want you out patrolling where you can be seen, but not at a risk. Marcus, keep in the loop with the Amatos. I want you working on our contacts, and you still need to work with our suppliers. I was able to get most of them to push back, except the guns."

"You want me to get in touch with the Cartel?" Marcus offers, and I immediately shake my head.

"No, last time you dealt with them, you killed their crew. I want you to stay away from them. Put Antonio back on that one. I really need Benjamin back, dammit."

"Your friend will be back as soon as he passes training. If he wants to come back, that is." Hollis's voice startles me, and I glare at the open doorway. "You really

should look into better security. After all, I was able to walk right in with no problem, and interrupt your little meeting.”

I want to drop my head when he smirks at Ignacio. I know exactly what the fuck he’s up to, and it’s not going to be good. Fuck.

“He will come back. He belongs here,” Ignacio snarls, advancing on Hollis, and fuck if that’s not a dangerous idea.

Sighing, I mutter curses before snapping, “Ignacio! Stop it, now! Get over here.”

Every muscle twitches as he glares at Hollis. I’m just about to reiterate my command when he turns on his heel and stalks toward me. I press my lips into a tight line, waiting for his response, while the entire room feels tense.

“My apologies, Boss,” Ignacio says haltingly.

I wave him away and glance at Marcus. “You have your orders. Both of you, get out.”

Marcus grabs Ignacio, pulling him out of the room while Hollis slides in fully. I roll my shoulders back, standing up to greet him. I offer my hand and he chuckles, before shaking his head. I let my hand fall, wishing there was some way to preserve a level of professionalism.

“Ah, Cucciolo, I wondered if you had it in you to give commands.” I grit my teeth at Hollis’s tone, but let the comment pass.

When he calls me from behind my desk with a crook of his finger, I move slowly. I’m not sure what the payment is that he wants, but hopefully it’s not something that ends in someone’s death—like mine.

“There we go. Now, I need access to everything. I can use your computer. However...I’d like something pretty to look at while I do it. Strip. Then I want to see you kneeling in the middle of the floor.”

My jaw drops as Hollis heads behind my desk. I sputter, but at his sharp look, I go completely silent. I run my hand through my hair, not even caring if it gets messed up. I undress quickly, hating the fact I’m already partially hard at his command. I kneel and stare at him as he starts tapping on my keyboard, ignoring me as if I’m nothing. I dig my nails into my thighs, trying to keep quiet.

I huff, but it must not be quiet enough because Hollis’s tapping stops. He slides a bored glance my way, and I cringe. I mutter an apology, and he seems to accept it. At least until he gives me his next command.

“Start stroking yourself, but don’t come. I want to watch you bring yourself to the edge—again and again.”

Biting my lip, I follow his instructions, hating it while also loving it. I lightly grip my cock, stroking myself and trying not to orgasm. I gather some of the pre-cum to help ease the movement, and shudder from it. I’m not sure how long Hollis works, but soon I’m on the edge, even a whisper of air would make me come. I drop my cock as I curse, “Fuck!”

“Did I say you could stop?” Hollis’s voice is hard, and his eyes show no mercy.

I shake my head, my muscles quivering as I try to calm down. I start again, having no choice in the matter. “No, Hollis.”

Part of me wants to call him Sir, and it fucks with my head. What's worse, I’m positive from his smirk that he knows where my mind is at. Still, I push forward, dragging the torture out. The pleasure and pain mix together as I bring myself to the

edge and stay there—unable to let myself tip over. Finally—fucking finally—the typing stops. I make sure to continue, because fuck if I’m going to be told I can’t come.

“—lube?” I blink repeatedly, realizing Hollis has been talking to me. Sighing, he repeats his question. “Cucciolo, where do you keep your lube? And I know you must have some, considering what you and your Daddy get up to.”

I flush red at the reminder of Master, and shakily respond, “Right top drawer.”

“Mmm, look at all those toys.” Humiliation washes over me as I know what he’s seeing. The cock cage, dildos, rope, loggers, and... “A cock ring sounds perfect. Unless you have an issue?”

He stands up and walks toward the door, opening it wide. I want to protest, but it dies on my lips when I see his sharp glance. I stretch my neck, trying to reduce some tension, and begrudgingly say, “No issue.”

“That’s what I thought. But let’s make this even more interesting.” He grabs his phone out and puts it on the bookcase, where I’m in full view. After some fiddling, I’m sure he’s recording me. My heart sinks as I know it’ll be yet another video for the Amatos. “There we go. On your hands and knees. I want to make sure we can both get off on this later—and I know you will. I’m sure even Benjamin will enjoy this.”

“You fucker,” I snarl as I get into position.

There’s a rustle of clothes behind me, and a quick laugh. My insult rolls right over him. He kneels behind me, humming as he pulls my ass cheeks apart, looking at my hole.

“Would you just get this over with?”

“No, Cucciolo. You don’t get to make demands.” His slap on my ass jolts me forward, but I scramble back into position. He puts the cock ring on me and I bite back more curses. I’m already on the fucking edge. “You know...I was going to fuck you hard, give you what you so desperately want, but I think you need a reminder that I’m in charge. Instead, you’re going to feel every inch of me, and know you’re coming on my cock.”

The prep is quick, belying his statement, but the rough entry is slow. I growl as he pushes forward at his own pace, bottoming out before withdrawing at an excruciatingly leisurely pace. My arms tremble as he continues, dragging his thick cock over my prostate each fucking time.

I push back, trying to force him to hurry. “Stop play around and fuck me!”

Smack . Smack . Smack .

The staccato spanking rains down on my ass, and I moan in pleasure. Hollis doesn’t speed up, but chuckles at my desperation. “If you don’t stay still, you won’t get to come.”

“Shit. Fuck. Jesus.” I can’t stop babbling as he hits my prostate again, and I bite my lip, wishing he’d go faster and let me fucking come. Sweat covers my entire body as I try to hold on, and when he grabs my throat and chokes me, finally speeding up, I start to unravel.

“I want you to remember I’m the one fucking you. This is what you get until your Master comes home. And maybe—just maybe—if you’re a good puppy, I’ll fuck you afterward, too. Now, scream my name.”

He lets go of my throat and undoes the cock ring. He’s right, I scream his name as he drives into me two more times. I’m flying apart without my dick even being touched.

I slump forward, my arms no longer able to hold me up. I barely feel him gripping my hips too tight as he fucks me harder. All I want is a nap, I'm so fucking sated. His own sound of pleasure rings loud in the room, even with the door open.

I grunt as he slowly withdraws from me. I barely have time to enjoy the afterglow before there's a fucking interruption. "What the hell?! Aren't you supposed to be focusing on finding Il Padrone? I'm so disgusted with you right now."

I stand up fully, glaring at Luca. I don't give a shit that I'm naked, even as I hear Hollis dressing. "I think you've overstayed your welcome. You aren't of any use here. I've given you plenty of slack, but it would be best if you return to your post, and continue the assignment Il Padrone gave you."

"You can't be fucking serious. You don't even have your Second, since the Amatos took him. This Family will fall apart without me. I should be the one in charge. Especially if you're fucking him ." Luca nods at Hollis.

I step towards him, wanting to get my hands around his neck, when Hollis nips in front of me. The oomph of pain from Luca stops me. "You fucking stabbed me!"

I swallow down a laugh, because while Luca may be a Martelli still, Il Padrone would have stabbed him too. Letting Hollis do it is fair enough. I turn and walk to the phone, dialing the number for Dr. Ranlen.

" Yes? "

"Sarah, we have a small situation. Luca's been stabbed. He's outside my office. Can you take care of it? It doesn't seem life threatening." I cringe, because that statement all depends on if Hollis decides to go further.

Sighing, Dr. Ranlen grumbles, " I'll have him brought to the clinic and work on him

here.”

“I want him ready to fly out as soon as possible.”

“ Yes, Boss. ” She clicks off and I roll my eyes. She’s never been the most patient. I’d be shocked if Luca is even given any pain medication when she finds out he was a jackass to our ally.

“If you’d please let him live, it would make things easier.”

I grab my clothes, quickly dressing. Hollis doesn’t give an agreement, but at least he doesn’t make a move to do more. Instead, he grabs his phone and taps on it. I’m not surprised when my own phone pings with an incoming email. I don’t bother checking it. I already know he sent me the video.

Ignoring it for now, I say, “I’ll get you the knife back. Thanks for leaving it in. Do you need a different one in the meantime?”

“No, I have others. And it was worth it.”

Snickering, I can’t disagree. Sometimes people deserve to be stabbed. Luca pushed it too far.

“I do think this underscores the need for our doctors to meet.”

“As I said, that’s Tennant’s area. Or Joel’s.”

I sit at my desk, running my hand through my hair. At this point, I may be bald by the time I get Master back. Carefully, I respond, “I’d prefer not to interrupt Tennant, at the moment. Although I really do need Benjamin home soon.”

Hollis watches me calculatngly. “I’ll give you Joel’s contact information. But I want to make something clear to you. If Benjamin chooses to stay with us, I won’t force him to come back.”

Gritting my teeth, I nod. “I don’t know what we’ll do in that situation, but I want my best friend to be happy. That’s what matters. If he doesn’t want to stay, I will make sure he comes home.”

Hollis hears the warning as he replies, “And I want Tennant to be happy. It leaves us in an interesting situation, doesn’t it?”

I stay quiet. There’s nothing that either of us can say at this point. Until I know where Benjamin stands on everything, I can’t anticipate what moves need to be made.

Shrugging a shoulder, I redirect him. “What do I owe you?”

“Hmm. You showed me you’re mine, and I got to draw blood. That gives you quite a discount. Tell you what, I’ll take an ‘I Owe You’, and we’ll call it good.”

I hate giving those out. Nobody likes to give blanket agreements like that. But, at the end of the day, we’re on the same side—at least, for now. I nod begrudgingly. From Hollis’s snicker, I get the impression he enjoys it far too much.

I don’t even have time to ask whether he was successful, or what he actually did, before he slips out of the office. Fuck . At this point, I’m just hoping we can survive until we get the Heads of the Families back. Especially when the Amatos are so...interesting.



*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:05 am*

“Are you sure that was smart?” Elias asks on our way back home.

No, not at all. “It was necessary,” I reply.

He snorts, but doesn’t bother saying anything else. We both know whatever argument he can come up with won’t change what happened, or what will come next.

The truth is, I didn’t plan any of that, certainly not the recording of me fucking Emilio—again. I wanted to reinforce my control, to show him that I meant it when I put him in his place before. I didn’t expect him to be so...perfect.

He’s defiant in a way my lovers aren’t. Even when Tennant and I are playing our games, there’s give on both our sides. With Emilio...he knows who he belongs to, and it isn’t me. It’s fun showing him that it doesn’t matter one bit when it’s just him and me.

Reining back in the need he’s awoken in me when we get the Bosses back is going to be...difficult. I’ll do it, because the last thing Cristian needs is to be at odds with Allesandro, but that doesn’t mean I won’t consider a...negotiation with the Martelli Boss first.

Especially since Tennant is hellbent on keeping Benjamin. There’s nothing to say the puppy and I can’t continue to have our fun...

Thankfully, the drive home is uneventful, though I’m sure I’ll hear more about it from Tennant later. He was...less than pleased when I told him of my plans. Though, he did agree that we couldn’t exactly trust many people right now, so taking the risk

of being physically on site to initiate the first step in securing their network was something I had to do.

It also allowed me to patch Leandro in, so he could tailor his kill-switch to their specific network. The other protections would take more time, but that, at least, is done. A few tweaks once I finish getting everything in order, and then we can go back to doing other things, which includes building up our own protections, should the fucking police deem it necessary to come after us.

When I enter the house, I'm met by Carter. I expected someone to be waiting for me, but I'm mildly surprised it's him.

"I had Tennant take Roman to bed," he explains without preamble. "The boy will work himself to death if we're not careful. He's so determined to show everyone that he can do this, he's blind to the fact he already has a handle on it."

I incline my head. "His insecurities are running rampant. I'm afraid that nothing we say or do will change that; only bringing Cristian home will ease his mind and heart."

"We all want that," Carter says, his voice catching a little.

I study the mafia spouse. Noting how dark the circles under his eyes are, and his slumped posture—something he would never allow while standing by Cristian's side, as he's always determined to make his husband look good.

I can see how Cristian's absence has beaten him down, and my heart goes out to him. It wasn't too long ago that Tennant was kidnapped. And while that was only for a few days, and I was confident that bastard Gerald Bradley wouldn't kill him, it was still the worst time of my life. I can't imagine how Carter feels right now, considering we don't have a who, just a direction of where to look.

If this goes on for much longer, I'm calling H, Emilio's opinion be damned.

“How are you holding up?”

Carter gives me a bland smile. “Swimmingly, can't you tell?”

I roll my eyes at his sarcasm. “Tell me you're attempting to sleep, at least. I don't know how Roman, or Tennant, for that matter, will hold up if you're down because you didn't take care of yourself.”

Carter scrubs a hand over his face, his fingers lightly trailing over his scar, before he drops his hand. “Lots of tossing and turning, and staring up at the ceiling. I've paced the whole house a few times, and I'm sure I look pretty pathetic as I do so. I'm not sleeping in our room, I'm in a guest bedroom. If I'm not mistaken, it's the same one Cris used when my connection to Georgio was discovered. Bit of irony there, if you ask me.”

“I'm sure Doc can get you something, if you need help sleeping.”

He shakes his head. “What I need is my husband.”

“We'll get him back, Carter.”

He nods stiffly and then says, “What are you doing with the Martellis? You and Tennant both.”

“We are...dealing as best we can. Emilio needed something that nobody else could give him, so I helped. I didn't intend for it to become more.”

“But it has?”

I wish I could lie, but that isn't my style. "Yes. He...brings out a side of me I didn't realize was there. At least, not in the way it is around him. It's not just sex, but neither of us is in a position to discuss what it could be. I'm aware he belongs to Il Padrone."

"And Tennant?"

"That is...more complicated. He's attached to Benjamin. The boy delights him. It's a fun challenge, and...he could probably fall for Benjamin, if given the chance." Not that I'll tell Ten that. Matters of the heart are something he has to come to accept himself, and that doesn't always look the way other people expect.

"What does Roman think of that?"

"He gave his blessing."

"That's not what I asked."

"We've discussed the possibility of what happens after. Everyone is aware of where Tennant stands. Being in a relationship like ours, our main goal is for everyone to be happy and content. If Benjamin is part of Tennant's happiness, who are we to begrudge him?"

Carter studies me for a long moment, his navy eyes boring into mine. "Don't break his heart, Hollis. That boy has so much love to give; don't abuse it." The threat of what he'll do if we hurt his son goes unsaid, but I hear it anyway.

"We're being careful." Relatively.

He nods and sighs. "I should head to bed for my few hours of restless sleep. Are you heading up?"

I shake my head. “I have too much work to do.”

He looks at me carefully. “Take care of yourself, too. That thing about not breaking Roman's heart? It applies to more than just fucking around with the Martellis.”

Carter heads upstairs, while I continue on to my office, mulling over our conversation.

I understand his concerns, but I can't be there for Roman in any capacity if the threat of us, or his friend, being arrested hangs over our heads. Or if his father never returns. That, more than anything, will break the boy.

For the first time in a long time, the office is my own. I've gotten so used to Leandro and Boston's presence, that sinking into work takes a moment. After sending messages to both Joel and Soren about Emilio and his doctor's plans to set up a meeting with Doc, I settle into work, letting the rest of the world fade away.

When my chair is pulled away from the desk, my first instinct is to reach for my knife, but the sudden weight of a familiar body has me relaxing again.

“Okay?” I ask Roman, grabbing the hair at the back of his head as he buries his face in my neck.

“Couldn't sleep. Didn't want to disturb anyone else.” Though we both know Tennant knew the moment he got out of bed—he just chose not to chase after him.

Roman koalas himself to my front, and I slide back up to the desk.

“It's been awhile since you've done this,” I comment as I let him go and get back to work.

“Haven't needed it.” His voice is so full of melancholy, I pause my work and look down at the top of his head.

“Are you sure you're okay with what we're doing with the Martellis?”

He shudders and takes a shaky breath, but nods. “Yeah, I am. Did I expect you to feel something for my friend? No. But, much as I won't tell Tennant not to pursue Benjamin, I won't tell you to stop with Lio.”

“You could, if you wanted to. You know that, right, Amore?”

He pulls back to look at me. His green eyes are full of a love I probably don't deserve, but will never let go of. “No. It's not... I'm not jealous or anything. Things are just...upside down right now, that's all.”

“I know. I'm sorry I can't make this better for you. If I could, I'd take away all your pain. That's how much you mean to me. Ti amo. You, Jude, and Ten are my life. If that means we have to close our relationship, and never touch someone else again, so be it. I've killed for less than whatever we're currently doing, and I won't hesitate to do it again.”

He scowls. “You can't kill the Martellis.”

“Are you sure?” I raise a brow.

“Yes. I promise, it's not that. Dad is gone, I'm in charge, and while the Family hasn't burned to the ground—yet—there's still time. I just... I feel inadequate. Adrift. I don't even know.”

Cupping his face with both hands, I press our mouths together, kissing him slow and deep. “You are everything I've always wanted, and then some. Because you're smart,

snarky, and love with your whole being. You're doing amazing because you were born for this; never doubt your ability to lead, because I, and our lovers, will follow you anywhere.

“And...” I give him a wry grin. “You can pick out your own Martelli, if you want.”

He laughs. “How generous of you.”

“I am. We're already in deep with them, might as well go all the way.”

He snorts. “Thank you. I love you.”

I kiss him again. “Love you, too. Never doubt that.”

“I don't.” He lays back against me and I hug him tightly.

When his body relaxes, I get back to work, some of my own tension easing as we soak up this small piece of normalcy in the eye of the storm.

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:05 am*

“ You don’t think he’s going to tell us anything new, do you?” Jude asks as we head into the warehouse where the torture room is.

“Not at all. This isn’t an interrogation, it’s pure torture, just because we can. We’re sending a message to him and anyone else who ever decides to fuck with us: It doesn’t matter who they are, or what their profession is, no one is above our laws.”

“How are you going to convey that?”

I smile at Benjamin’s question. “We’re going to give him back when we’re finished. So make sure to wear gloves at all times.”

The guard standing outside our “guest’s” room opens the door for us, and I grab the box of disposable gloves that are sitting on the table right inside the door. “Today you’re both learning something new,” I tell them as we don our gloves before I turn the thermostat in the room down.

Even as the cooling system kicks on, my blood heats with anticipation. It’s been a while since I’ve done this particular torture, Carter was the last person, in fact. I grin just remembering it. I tried so many things out on him back then, the memories are fond—for me, not him. I have a feeling this experience will be much the same.

Our test subject is already strapped to the table, and though he doesn’t make a sound, he does glare at us. We all know there’s no getting out of this; he knows what’s coming, and the bit of bravery he’s putting on in the face of it is nothing but a smokescreen.



“I wonder,” I say softly, with a hint of curiosity in my tone. “How many of our secrets did you give up? How many of your own did you try to conceal? Surely your badge won’t save you from this justice-seeking wanker.”

Silence. Which...is annoying. It’s always so much more fun when I can taunt them. “Jude, get the bag from over there. Benjamin, you can fill up the pitcher.”

It doesn’t take long to have the canvas bag secured over his head. “If you tell us something, anything, maybe we’ll spare you.” It’s bullshit, of course, but a quick death would be kinder than what’s about to occur.

When nothing comes, I gesture for Benjamin to start pouring the water over his covered face. “Slow and steady,” I instruct. “We want this to be continuous, rather than over too quickly.”

The unlucky test subject starts thrashing, and I hold up a hand to get Benjamin to stop with the water. “You know what makes waterboarding so fun,” I say to no one in particular. “No matter how many times you endure it, you never become numb to the sensation. The fear of drowning is too great to override the logical side of your brain that tells you it’ll end eventually.”

I give Benjamin a nod, and he continues to pour the water. “It’s interesting,” I tell my rapt audience. “Because of the support, and angle of the head and neck, while water gets into the lungs, it doesn’t actually fill them up this way. Which means the feeling of drowning occurs over and over, with death nowhere in sight.”

Benjamin runs out of water and he looks at me. “This seems simple enough, too easy for you.”

I grin at him. “Ah, Topolino, you know me so well. You’re right, this isn’t all that we’re doing to him today.”

Heading off to the side, where my favorite toy waits, I grab the cart and push it over to the table. Jude laughs while Benjamin looks on in concern.

“I figured the point of this exercise was to teach us something. How can you do that if you kill him too quickly?”

“Patience, Topolino. It’ll all make sense in a moment. One would think that with all of these questions about my methods, you want to stay here and learn more, rather than go home after this.”

Benjamin doesn’t respond, which is almost telling in itself, but...he is the one who said he needed to go home. Consent is a...very frustrating thing. Part of me wants to keep him here until he’s fully up to my standards, but he’s right; it’s been long enough. Less than a week is hardly enough time to learn what he needs to, but I trust him to return for more lessons. And I can’t wait to teach him everything I can. Besides, he’s mine now, he can’t disappear so easily.

Attaching the clips to the wanker’s big toes, I adjust the dials. “Have you ever unplugged a toaster, and maybe your hands were a little damp?”

“Sure...”

I smile at the uncertainty in Benjamin’s tone. “This will be like that...until we decide otherwise.” I look up and meet two pairs of attentive eyes. “Who wants to go first?”

Jude volunteers, making his way over to me. I kiss him, savoring his taste, eager to get this part over with so I can do something about the tension building in me.

If I didn’t have either of them to take care of, I would have worked the guy over and killed him already. As well as I’m pretending to hold it together, that is far from the truth. I’ve spent years hiding what lurks underneath the surface, and this situation is

no different, though it's taking much more of my concentration. For each day that passes without Cristian, is a day the chain of control loosens...

"Take the bag off, Benjamin," I order. "I want him to see what's coming."

As he does that, I hook the poor bastard up to a heart rate monitor, both to make sure we don't kill him, and to help teach them how much they're able to give a person safely.

"Here's what's going to happen," I tell all three of them. "You two are going to take turns experimenting with various currents. I don't want you to kill him, so you'll have to be very careful."

Stepping back, I make sure Benjamin does the same, before giving Jude the nod to turn the dial. Watching someone be electrocuted will never get old. The choked off scream, the way the human body convulses under the current. Even at the lowest wattage the machine can go, the wanker's body twitches in his bonds as Jude turns the electricity on and off, experimenting with different lengths of time.

When they switch places, and Benjamin takes over manning the machine, I direct their attention to the still-twitching body on the table. "Next time we do this, there will be no heart monitor, so pay close attention. This has to be on instinct, watch the way he twitches, the pattern of his breathing. Listen to what his body is telling you. Torture is about more than just giving your subject pain, but knowing how to make that pain the most effective."

Picking up another set of clips and connecting them to the machine, I wait until he stops twitching, keeping an eye on his heart rate. When it's elevated, but not too much, I attach the clips to his sides, right under his ribs.

"Go ahead and start slow, Benjamin. I want to see what you've learned from

observing, so keep it going as long or as short as you think he can handle, but don't kill him yet."

Off and on, Benjamin works the machine, proving he's a quick study by varying the length of time he electrocutes the wanker. When I give the okay, he clicks the dial up another notch.

I watch carefully to make sure he doesn't accidentally go too far, especially with how close the clips are to his heart.

Raising my hand as the heart monitor begins to scream at us, I stop the torture, happy to smell the burning flesh from where the clips are. "Very good, Topolino. Jude, get some more water." I look at Benjamin. "Turn the machine all the way up, please."

"This is not where I thought the day was going."

"No?" I tilt my head. "Were you expecting more bloodshed? I have to admit, while I love that part too, sometimes you have to vary it. Monotony is boring, and it can make you sloppy once things become predictable. Having a good variety of different skills isn't a bad thing. Different people need different things, so you need as many options as you can have at your disposal, in order to get the desired results. Especially when you're torturing for information. Plus," I grin, "it's fun."

Benjamin seems to absorb my words, but when I say the last part, he scoffs. I fight back the urge to push him. Soon enough, he'll let the darkest parts of himself have more free rein. I don't have time right now to coax it out of him, though.

When Jude returns with the pitcher of water, I nod to the test subject. "Go ahead and drench him."

Still conscious, kind of, our toy shakes his head and tries to protest, but can't quite

get the words out, his brain too scrambled from the electric shocks.

Jude holds the pitcher over his body and tips it, letting the water spill down the length of him. Once finished, I motion for him. “Best to keep clear now, Agnellino. We don’t want you to accidentally get electrocuted. You too, Benjamin. Back up with the cart until you’re further away from the water on the floor.”

Once we’re all an acceptable distance away, I give Benjamin the signal to turn the machine on.

It’s a beautiful sight, with the lights flickering above us. We watch as our subject jolts on the table, the restraints the only thing holding him in place. The heart monitor goes crazy, alarms ringing out until finally...they stop. Benjamin quickly turns the machine off and the body continues to twitch, the current still running through it.

“Beautiful,” I say, before I grab Jude and kiss him deeply.

My cock is hard as pride swirls through me; both of them did well, and I want to reward them. Pulling away from Jude’s mouth, I ask, “What do you want, Agnellino?”

He sucks in a deep breath and says, “I want to watch you fuck him... And then I want you to suck me off.”

I groan. “You’re turning into a voyeur, Little Lamb.”

Jude kisses me, hard and deep. “Only because watching you is so much fun... I like seeing you take what you want.” He grabs me by the jacket and pulls me in, his pale green eyes watching me very carefully as he releases my suit and slides his hands down to mine. “I know who you belong to... Watching you claim someone else is...hot.” He places one of my hands over his growing erection. “Let me see... Make

him scream loud enough for me to hear.”

“Fuck, Little Lamb. Are you trying to kill me?”

He smirks. “Not today.”

I huff out a laugh, kiss him one more time, and then turn to where Benjamin is standing, watching us with rapt attention, cheeks already flushed, and body practically pulsing with need.

Crossing over to him, I pull him to me, kissing him roughly. I enjoy the way his mouth gives, even as he tries to keep up with me, his tongue tangling with mine.

He clutches at me, shoving aside my jacket and gripping my shirt tight enough that I’m concerned about the potential rippage.

Pushing him against one of the tables around the perimeter of the room, I scramble to undo his shirt and pants. We strip off our gloves so we’re touching skin, and the feel of him lights me on fire. “Jude wants to hear you, Topolino. It’d be remiss to disappoint him, so make sure you scream loud enough for his hearing aids to pick it up.”

Benjamin shudders. “So sure of your skills?”

“I aim to please, and I always deliver...”

Shoving his pants down, I lift him and set him on the edge of the table. He kicks his shoes off and I pull his pants all the way down and off, shrugging out of my jacket next. I don’t bother undressing any further, or getting Benjamin out of any more of his clothes, I simply open my pants, pulling out my hard cock. This is going to be quick and dirty, something to tide us over while he goes back to smooth over the

feathers at the Martellis', proving we can keep our word and they had nothing to worry about.

Kissing him again, I moan at the taste and feel of him. The soft, vulnerable parts of him that are so easy to see, and hide the real strength of him.

"You've impressed me," I tell him, slipping a hand between us and gripping his inner thigh, shoving it outwards as far as possible. "You deserve a reward for how well you've done."

He groans, wrapping one leg around me as he scoots closer to the edge of the table, leaving his ass wide open for me.

"I'll give you the choice just this once, Baby Mouse... How much lube do you want?"

Benjamin looks up at me from behind his glasses, his eyes full of need, lips swollen red. "None. Make me feel it."

My cock throbs at the want and slight desperation in his voice. "You want me to fuck you raw? Make it so you can't sit for days?"

He hisses and nods. "Unless you don't have it in you?"

Moving my hand from his leg to his hole, I push a finger in, working through his tight heat as he shakes and gasps in my arms. "Do I need to teach you a lesson on taunting me, Topolino?" Leaning in, I whisper, "Here's a hint: you won't win."

He digs his fingers into my arms, hard enough that I'm sure I'm going to have bruises once the shirt comes off. "Prove it."

Pulling my finger out of him, I back up enough to spit in my hand a few times, coating my cock with it. Despite what we've both said, I refuse to leave permanent damage; I'm an asshole, but not that kind.

Gripping one ass cheek in hand, I spread him open further as I press the tip of my hard and leaking cock against his hole. "Remember...make sure Jude can hear you."

When I push in, Benjamin cries out, his voice a sweet melody in my ear as his nails dig into my skin through my shirt. His hole spasms and tries to deny me entry, but it doesn't last long. Benjamin wants this as much as I do...maybe even more, if the way he tugs me closer with his arms and legs is any indication.

Pulling out almost all of the way, I spit again before slamming into him, beginning a brutal pace that has us both moaning and grunting with each thrust.

"Fuck, you're a perfect fit for me, Topolino," I groan. "Made for my cock, like so few are."

"Who knew you were a...secret softie," he says between gasps of air.

"I'm everything my partner wants me to be," I say, just loud enough for him to hear me. "That includes you now."

The look he gives me is wide eyed, but I ignore the astonishment in his gaze as I fuck him harder, making the torture tools fall off the table and onto the floor.

"I'm going to send you back to your fiancé with my cum deep inside you," I tell him, shoving in deep and grinding into him.

"D-don't," he protests, even as he throws his head back in pleasure.



Gripping his hair with one hand, as I dig the fingers of my other into his ass cheek, I expose his throat to me. “I’ll stop when I believe you actually hate it.”

Before he can say anything further, I bite him, right over the bruise that's already around his throat from where I choked him during our first time. Benjamin screams, his voice echoing off the cement walls of the room as I break the skin, his blood filling my mouth as I shove my cock into him a few more times before I come, flooding his ass.

I hold him still for a long moment, as he shakes and my dick pulses inside him. Biting deeper—not as deep as when I bit Hollis in the same place, but close—I make sure to leave my mark on him for all to see.

When I pull out, I meet his hazy, wide eyes. Smiling gently, I place a bloody kiss on his lips. “You can get yourself off by watching me suck my Lamb’s cock.”

Looking around for Jude, I find him in the lone chair I had brought in especially for him. He’s watching Benjamin and me with eyes full of desire, and his hard cock in hand. I don’t hesitate to drop to my knees in front of him, swallowing him down the moment I hit the floor.

“Fuck,” he moans, tangling a hand in my hair.

The sound of both Jude and Benjamin getting off brings me pleasure, my insides warming in a way they only do when I’m with my lovers.

Keeping my hands firmly on Jude’s thighs, I pull out all the stops, licking and sucking, taking him deep into my throat, wanting to make him come. It doesn’t take long. His fingers grip my hair achingly tight as I pull up, tonguing the head as I move one hand to his cock, and begin jerking him off roughly.

When he comes, I swallow most of it, letting the last burst sit on my tongue, even as I kiss the head of his dick, making sure to get every last drop.

Standing, I kiss him, sharing some of his taste before moving back to Benjamin, happy to see he's got his cock in hand, cum running down his wrist. Grabbing him roughly by the hair, I kiss him too, shoving the rest of Jude's cum into his mouth. He gasps and shudders, but doesn't make a move to pull away.

Breaking the kiss, I grin at him. "You'll take everything I give you, won't you, Topolino?"

At first, I don't think he's going to answer, but then he nods and says, "Yes."

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:05 am*

Back in our cell, I stare down at the bloody stump where my finger used to be. The sight of it makes me want to chop off every single finger of the assholes keeping us captive, and make them eat each one. I've never been much into creative torture—that's always been Ten's area—but I can make an exception here.

What the fuck is taking so long? My unpleasant encounter with our host only lasted a few minutes. He gloated about one of my top dealers getting picked up, then got pissed when I didn't give him the reaction he wanted, so he had his guys cut my finger off. He didn't stick around for that, of course—fucking coward.

I figured it'd be the same for Allesandro, but I've been sitting in this cell long enough for the blood on my residual finger to clot.

If they killed Il Padrone, nothing will stop Emilio from burning the world down.

As the thoughts run through my head, the door to the cell opens and three goons walk in, carrying a prone and listless Allesandro between them. I stand, the chain around my ankle scraping against the floor and making them glare at me, even as they drop Allesandro to the floor and chain him up again.

"What the fuck did you do?" I demand, stalking forward, ignoring the guns pointed at me.

"Back the fuck off, or he'll wake up to find your corpse," the one holding the gun barks.

"I cannot wait until Il Padrone takes you apart. I will piss on your graves."

They all laugh as if they think I'm kidding. That's fine, let them have their delusions. Every infraction against us is another minute of torture before we end their miserable lives.

When they leave us, I sit as close to Allesandro as the chains allow, watching his every movement, waiting impatiently for the asshole to wake up.

What feels like half an hour later, but it could have been several hours, or just a few minutes, for all I know, he finally stirs.

Bright blue eyes crack open and he groans. I give him a bland smile once his gaze focuses on me.

"Stop being so lazy," I quip, defaulting to humor to hide that I was worried about the fucker. "Just because we're away from our Families, doesn't mean it's a vacation."

"Fuck off," he mutters, carefully sitting up. "You'd be tired too if they stabbed and cut you, and fucking stole a damn finger!"

I hold up my hand and show him my crudely wrapped missing finger. "They did, and I didn't take a nap afterwards. Man up."

He snorts. "Well, at least we're matching."

I laugh humorlessly and move to sit back against the wall, my worry now easing since he's up and talking normally.

"Carter is going to be pissed about this," I muse.

"That has nothing on how Emilio is going to react." He smiles a little. "I almost pity them."

My laugh this time is genuine. “I can’t wait for the show.”

Because it will be a sight to see once our Families come for us. Kidnapping us is one thing, but maiming? Yeah... I wouldn’t want to be any of those poor fuckers.

It’ll be like Christmas came early for Tennant and Emilio, and I am so looking forward to it.

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:05 am*

The car rolls to a stop and I'm so fucking exhausted, I worry won't be able to drag myself into the house. At least Tennant didn't come with me. That's a shitshow I don't want to start right now. It was only Hollis that kept him back. Truthfully...I wanted him to come. It's fucked-up, but he lights something up in me. Something that's been missing. It never used to be, but it slipped through my fingers— our fingers—at some point.

Giving my thanks to the Amato driver, I nod my hellos to the guards stationed outside of the mansion. Stepping inside, I'm thrown into the past, when Ignacio first brought me here. When I was that scared, naïve kid who thought kidnapping wasn't the best thing in the world. How quickly things change.

Midas, Lio's dog, gives me a quiet woof on my entrance. I look around for my best friend, but don't see him. "Where's your owner, Midas?"

I probably shouldn't say owner. I've seen those two interact, and Lio belongs to Midas more than the other way around. Then again, that dog is so incredibly pampered, I'm surprised he would consider anyone his owner. When Midas nudges the door to Lio's office open fully, I drop my hand on his head and pet him in thanks. Taking a deep breath, I walk in.

My heart hurts when I see my best friend slumped over, his head in his hands. "Hey. I won't ask how things are, but at least I'm back."

Lio's head snaps up, relief crossing his face. "Thank fuck you're here. I've fucking missed you. Antonio filled in, and while he did a good job, he's not you."

I smile, even though I'm worried about the outcome of the conversation we're about to have. "It's good to know I'm needed."

"And wanted," Lio says sharply. "Speaking of which, before we get down to the issues, I have three things to say. One, good job finding your comfort with violence. Two, nicely done on faking bad form with Tennant—but you fucking know better than to let your guard down all the way. And three, do I need to kill Ignacio?"

I snort, scrubbing my face with my hands. That's my best friend for sure. "Do I even want to know why you're asking about point three?"

Lio gestures for me to sit on the small couch he keeps in his office. I'm not surprised to see him working out of it, instead of Il Padrone's. I am surprised when he stands and joins me. He situates himself so he can stare at me directly. It's slightly disconcerting.

"So, I'm sure there's some best friend rule thingy that you'll break out. Something along the line of emotions, feels, whatever. I'm going to preempt that, and you can tell me what the fuck is going on. Do you want Tennant? Do you no longer love Ignacio? Should I kill Ignacio to make things easier on you? And did he hurt you? Because I can make his death slow."

I give an aborted laugh because... fuck, where the hell do I begin? "Tennant is...complicated. I don't know what the hell happened. One moment, I'm just there for training, and the next, I'm being claimed. And I claim him in return.

"I wish I had a logical explanation—you know how much I prefer those—but this defies all logic. He calls to me. I guess that's the only thing I can say. There's something in him that brings out a freedom in me."

"Hmm. I guess I can see that. Me falling in love with Master wasn't logical, I

suppose. And it's far from where I started with the Family. But having the freedom to let go, to take off societal expectations, that is definitely heady."

I sigh in relief, leaning toward him, because at least he gets it. "It really is. After everything that happened with Jax...things were in a tailspin. You know that. You've walked with me when I've paced at night. You trained me, when you had time, knowing I needed it. Not only so I'd be prepared for this, but to work through some of what I went through. I never, ever, want to be that helpless again.

"I did everything I could to protect Ignacio, by giving myself over to that maniac. And Ignacio doesn't... Shit! I don't want to say he doesn't care, but he treats me like I'm glass that'll break. Tennant doesn't do that, as you saw when I did fuck up and he put me in my place, despite our connection."

"Yeah, those punches. Damn." Lio cringes. "I'm not saying you didn't earn them, but fuck. He doesn't pull them. Ignacio is pissed about that, by the way. And yes, I shared the video. I wanted to see his reaction, and to make sure I didn't need to handle anything before you got here. But, we've talked about Tennant, and a little about Ignacio. Now, tell me. Do you love Ignacio? Do you still want to get married?"

It's like the bottom of my life falls out from under me. I'd been deliberately not thinking about this. We were so happy. What the fuck do I say? Hell, I'm not even sure how I feel some days.

I can still remember those first moments of love, that thrill of our engagement, but then I think about what came after. The way he withdrew. The way he put me into a box, one I don't fit in anymore.

Slowly, I say, "You know, at the start of all this, he had problems taking instructions from me. And yeah, we had some hot, possessive sex because of it. But...it felt empty. Now that I've been with Tennant, I can see that. It's like he was trying to hold



onto me, but I was already slipping away. Not on purpose. Fuck, none of this was on purpose. I wanted him so badly. I loved him so much. But at the end of the day...

“No, I understand. I have to let you know something, and it may be hard to hear.” I gulp as I stare into my friend’s eyes. “I know you say you’ve been slipping away, and this may make it worse. When I came home from uh, visiting with Hollis, Ignacio went crazy that you weren’t with me. Don’t worry, I punished him for showing any doubts in you. But I want you to be prepared for when you see him.”

“Fuck,” I whisper. “And that’s the problem. He’s tearing us apart. Hell, he tore us apart with his doubts and his need to control me, to protect me. He says he wants the best for me, but how can he? How can he want the best for me when he won’t give me space to grow?”

Lio surprises me by pulling me in for a hug, and I go greedily, needing this comfort as my heart breaks. Because it does. The pain throbs inside me, and worse—I know I’m going to have to break Ignacio’s heart as well. How do I do that to someone who just wants to protect me?

Pushing me away gently, Lio gives me a sad smile. “Do you think you could find your way back to each other?”

I turn my head and stare off into the distance. It’s a thought that’s run through my mind before, and I don’t have an answer. Or maybe it’s that I have an answer, but don’t want to admit it. “I...”

“Got it. Well, if I do need to kill Ignacio, because he’s being a pest, or it’s too much for you, can you wait until we get Il Padrone back? I can kill him beforehand, but I could really use his help still. If he’ll actually be helpful.” Lio’s face scrunches up in doubt, and I have to bite my tongue from asking about what Ignacio told him. I don’t want to place my best friend in the middle of things, and really, this is something I

need to tackle on my own.

“No need to kill him.” At least, I hope so. “But I think I’m going to get ready for bed. I’ll check with Ignacio first, but I’ll probably crash in my old room. That way, we can hit the ground running tomorrow.”

Lio nods, somewhat distractedly, but waves me on. “A suggestion before you go see Ignacio. Take a shower. Maybe put some makeup over where Tennant claimed you. Unless you want to flaunt it, which I’ll stand by you on, however you’d like to do it. I’ve never broken up with someone.”

I stand up and touch my best friend’s shoulder. He gives me a smile, even as his eyes are filled with worry. There’s nothing else we can talk about. Tomorrow will be another day of work. I’m excited to be part of it, to be the Second Lio deserves. We will find Il Padrone, and make the world pay for taking him.

But first, I need to tear myself and the man who used to stand by my side apart. I don’t have a fucking clue how to do it. How do I tell someone I’ve loved, who I know still loves me, that one chapter has ended, and maybe there won’t be another? That maybe the pages are blank for us? The ink all dried up, and it’s time to put it away, even if we wished for more.

We don’t live in a world where happily ever afters exist. If they did, I’d hold onto him, and love him forever. But now it’s time to close the book and put it away. All I can hope is that there’s another book out there for each of us. One that brings us our own happiness, even if it’s no longer together.

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:05 am*

“Be careful, we don't have time for you to be sidelined,” Roman says.

I huff but give him an indulgent smile. “I am always careful, Little Prince. Remember, Carter and Jude are in charge of security. So, if shit hits the fan, you and Hollis fucking listen to them. Understand?”

He rolls his eyes. “Yes, Tennant. Go, the last thing we need is to piss them off by being late; they're already unhappy we delayed the exchange.”

“I'll check in when the deal is over.”

He raises his chin and I kiss him, slow and sweet. “Later, I'll take you upstairs and lavish you with the attention you deserve. Maybe I'll watch Jude take you first, and then fuck his cum out of you.”

Roman moans and reaches for me, but I back away, smirking at the desperation on his face.

“I'll see you soon.”

Walking away is hard, especially when I know how much he needs space to just let go, after the hell he's been through.

Hollis told me about their conversation the other night, and I hate that there's nothing we can do to slay the demons in Roman's mind, aside from being there to catch him when he falls.

I am much better at the physical than emotional stuff, but over the years, I've tailored myself to be what my lovers need. And now, that goes for Benjamin. It was... unexpected, but not unwanted.

I've never been one to deny myself pleasure. And Benjamin gives me so much—physical and...the dreaded emotional. Playing with him is as fun as it is when Jude challenges me, just in different ways.

Joel is waiting by the front door, and he straightens up from where he was leaning against the wall. “Benjamin's driver let us know that he made it inside the Martelli mansion.”

“Good. I still hate that they didn't allow me to accompany him. We could have headed to the meeting from there.”

He snorts. “Yeah, sure. I doubt Ignacio would have let you leave, had you shown up on their property, with Benjamin looking the way he does. There wasn't any chance they would have let you go unscathed. Roman would have killed you if you were late for the meeting because of some petty posturing.”

I sneer at the bodyguard as we make our way out to the car. “I don't appreciate you being the voice of reason.”

“Someone needs to be,” he says mildly.

I roll my eyes as I slide into the backseat. We decided it would only be Joel and I going to the meeting—not counting the people in charge of transporting the weapons to the drop—as we don't want to put the gang on edge even more than they already are.

The mid-sized Jamaican gang might not have a foothold in our territory; thanks to

Petrov, the Martellis, and us being in the area, but it would be remiss of us to discount them.

That they happily shell out money for our weapons is telling of the firepower they have behind them.

No, it's better to not spook them anymore than necessary.

The drive is long, as we agreed to move the meeting from the usual place to a neutral territory near the gang's stomping grounds. The move makes sense with the police breathing down our necks, but there were plenty of other places we could have done this that were closer to Amato territory. Nevermind, as long as we all walk away with what we want, nothing else matters.

Joel takes longer than necessary to scope out the situation when we get to the industrial park they chose as our meeting place, before opening my door. I keep my expression smooth, since we're in mixed company, but he knows me well enough that I'm sure he can tell I'm not impressed.

“Mr. Mason,” the gang leader says. “Wasn't sure you'd actually show up.”

“We're early. Not only that, we've never broken our word before.”

He narrows his dark eyes. “But you have been rather inconvenient recently...”

I give him an indulgent smile. “I mean, if you want to run the risk of being arrested, I'll note that for next time.”

That earns me a huff. “You're lucky your product is as good as it is. I would hate to shop around...”

Shrugging, I gesture to the driver of the truck, giving him the signal to prep for the transfer. “If that's what you want. I can guarantee you won't find a better deal, no matter who you go to.” And if it's the Martellis...well, I think it's safe to say, we can negotiate with them, if need be.

“Shall we get this over with?”

The leader nods and snaps his fingers, then one of his lackeys hands him a phone. A few seconds after he types something on it, my own phone buzzes.

HOLLIS

Payment received.

Giving the signal for my men to open the truck door, all hell breaks loose.

Cop cars come screaming from either direction as people rush out of the surrounding buildings.

In the chaos and confusion, as the gang members—except the leader and two others—try to scatter, while my men move to secure the product, Joel shoves me back against the car when I pull my gun.

“Are you crazy?” he hisses.

“Fucker sold us out.”

“And we'll deal with that later. If you go down for weapons and murder charges, Hollis will fucking kill me.”

I curse because I know he's right. We're already in enough shit, the last thing we need

is to make the fuckers' jobs easier for them.

Putting my gun away, I sigh and raise my hands when police descend on us. They yank Joel away from me, and the bodyguard is not happy.

I wince because I'm sure a resisting arrest charge is going to be stacked onto him with how he's fighting. Hypocrite .

Having gone through a song and dance before, despite it being under different circumstances, I don't bother resisting, or responding to anything they say.

As they strip me of my weapons and phone, and read me my rights, I run over everything needed in my head.

Thankfully, I went with my instincts and left Jude at home, rather than use this as a teaching opportunity. Roman is going to need him, as both a Second and a lover—Hollis will too, though he'll be reluctant to admit that.

“You could be a little more gentle,” I snark when the cuffs are placed on my wrists. “I like it rough, but only with certain people.”

I'm ignored and marched to a waiting car. Really, the whole thing is uninspiring, and if it wasn't for Joel, I'd probably be on my way to the hospital with police-issued gunshot wounds, rather than shoved into the tiny backseat of a police cruiser. Pity. I would have preferred an ambulance ride.

The car door slamming behind me reverberates in my head, and weariness settles in as I anticipate a long wait until Sinclair can work his magic.

Cristian can never find out about this...

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 1:05 am*

I 'm sitting in my chair, trying hopelessly to read, when there's a knock on the door. I carefully set the book aside, wondering who it could be this late.

Fuck . I hope it's not Lio again. I don't want any more bad news. All I've done is think about my Little Mouse since I saw that video. I can't wait to have him back in my arms. I don't even give a fuck about Tennant. Whether it's a one-time fuck, or if he wants something more, as long as he still loves me, that's what matters.

I open the door and blink in shock. "You've never knocked before."

I stumble back, my heart pounding as my mind races. Benjamin cautiously enters the room, eyeing me as if I'm dangerous. That alone kills me. Fuck. No. With a weak smile, he says, "I... We need to talk."

Swallowing roughly, I take a seat on the bed. I gesture for him to sit next to me, but he shakes his head, taking the chair I was sitting in before. My skin feels too tight, and I wish I could pause this or fucking skip over it, anything to not hear the words that I think are coming.

I slow my breathing. Maybe I'm wrong. After all, this is my Little Mouse. We've been through so much together, and his smile when I asked him to be mine forever... That can't be faked. It can't have fallen through my fingers.

"Whatever it is, Little Mouse, I'm here. Always. You know I'd never leave you," I croak out, because he closes his eyes. He fucking closes his eyes. As if he can't bear to look at me.



When he opens them, they glisten with tears that haven't fallen. I wait patiently, needing to hear the words out loud, but still hoping I'm wrong. "I loved you for a long time. Fuck. Ever since you kidnapped me and brought me into this twisted world. We went through hell together, and I thought it meant we'd come out stronger. I was so proud to wear your ring on my finger, but..."

He tugs off the ring I bought him, the one Lio helped me pick out because I needed it to be perfect. Something fitting for the love of my life. He holds it out, but I shake my head, refusing to take it. My hands are trembling so hard that I curl them into fists. He places it on the book I'd been trying to read instead.

"Why? If it's Tennant... I can share. I don't want to hold you too close. If I'm stifling you...you just have to talk to me, Little Mouse." Desperation tinges every word, and I want to reach for him. Despite being only a few feet away, it feels like a million. It's like he's slipping away, second by second.

"I did talk to you, but you didn't listen." Benjamin tugs at his hair, his shoulders slumping. His clothes move just enough for me to see where Tennant claimed him. His makeup has not blended over it, and I know it's there. I fucking know. Pulling myself back, I try to listen. "I needed you to believe in me. Especially after we survived Jax. I needed you to help teach me to be strong. But all you wanted was to wrap me in bubble wrap! Lio fit in training lessons whenever he could, and I know you were the one who trained him. Yet, you wouldn't work with me. No matter how many times I asked, you made an excuse. You knew there was a chance I'd need to be a Second, but I was left unprepared. Worse, you didn't back me when I did become a Second.

"Every moment, Ignacio. Every fucking moment you tried to put me in a box that I don't fit in. When you first kidnapped me, I probably would have appreciated that. Not anymore. You should have listened. Because now it's too late."

"No! It can't be too late! I love you. I'd do anything for you. Please, give me a

chance. Let me make this up to you. I'm sure I can. Don't throw our dreams away because I was an idiot." I stand up, unable to stay sitting when he's tearing my soul into pieces.

"I'm sorry, Ignacio. There isn't a chance anymore. I tried, but I couldn't keep us together on my own. I hope?—"

The door bangs open and I jump, whirling around. Lio is standing there, breathing heavily as he takes us both in. Wincing under our stares, he shakes his head in apology before announcing, "Some Amatos have been arrested, including Tennant."

Benjamin doesn't say a word to me as he sprints out of the room. Lio gives me a sad look before he heads out as well, and I slump back onto the bed. I press my hand to my chest, where my heart is supposed to be. The way it's crumbling, I'm not sure it even exists anymore. He didn't even look back.

I let out a deep roar of pain, wanting to smash everything in this fucking room, because everywhere I look, I see him. I see him playing his video games. I see him lying in bed after we've made love. And I see him smiling as he dances with me in the middle of the room, pretending we're on a deserted island.

Now it seems true, but I'm the one on that island, all by myself, because the other half of me walked away. No, he fucking ran. And there's nothing I can do about it.

The world around me is falling apart, and I can't do shit about it. For a moment, I consider ending it all. I don't want to watch my love skip into a happy future with another man. Another man who fucking claimed him, as if he had that right. Then again, I guess he did.

While I was busy trying to save my love, I lost him because I didn't embrace him. I listened, but didn't hear—didn't see what was right in front of me. Not until he was telling me it's too late.

The tears escape as I can't hold them in anymore. They choke me as my mind tries to make sense of the unimaginable. I have no strength in me. I bend over, catching my head in my hands as I try to piece all of this together. I pushed him away, and I didn't even know. I thought he'd always be here, that I was doing the right thing by protecting him.

He didn't even look back...

To be continued...