



Shifting Ties (Crimson Bonds #2)

Author: *Abrianna Denae, Leigh Kenzie*

Category: LGBT+

Description: Captives.

Kidnapped Mafia Bosses Allesandro Martelli and Cristian Amato are listless. Days spent in chains, while taunted about the discord in their territories, leaves the Bosses with an ever growing sense of doom regarding their Families.

Lovers.

What should have been a fun way to relieve stress turns into real feelings, leaving unexpected pairings reeling from the depth of their connections. The shifting dynamics force the Amatos and Martellis involved to reevaluate where they belong, as the newly formed relationships cause strife and uncertainty in a dangerous time.

Adversaries.

As their enemy gets bolder, both Families must set their hurt feelings and bruised hearts aside, or run the risk of becoming a casualty to the war waged against them. If only matters of the heart were as easy to wade through as the bodies they leave in their wake.

Total Pages (Source): 37

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

As a parent, the worst thing is seeing your child in pain and not being able to do anything about it.

Seeing Roman bark orders, pacing back and forth behind the desk with the phone to his ear as he tries to coordinate our people, while also keeping a bead on the lawyers and police, trying to get any hint of what might be going on, fills me with both pride and dread. He's coming into his own so well, but the reasons why he's had to take on such a role before he was ready are devastating.

If you didn't know him, you would think Roman had it all under control, but I can see it. The way his entire body is strung taut as he holds the weight of the Family on his slender shoulders. There's a darkness in his green eyes that scares me, and a hopelessness that has been creeping in with each passing day. This was a blow nobody needed. Too bad assholes don't ask opinions when they go about ruining your life.

Roman hangs up the phone and plants his hands on the desk. Leaning over the surface, his head drops down and his entire body shakes as he lets out a sob that he's held in for far longer than I thought he would.

Jude tries to comfort him, but Roman pushes him away, and it breaks me to the very core of who I am as a father to see my son so broken.

"There's nothing they can do now," Roman says between heavy, body shaking cries. "It's too early, and they're still in the middle of processing them. We'll know more in the morning, but who the fuck knows what will happen by then." Roman straightens up, hitting the desk with his fist. "If the police are after us, there's no telling that Ten

will even be alive come morning.”

“Don’t,” Jude says before I can. “It’s Tennant. It’ll take a lot more than some high and mighty cops to take him out. If he heard you talking like that he’d probably kill you for losing faith in him.”

Roman huffs at the light tone to Jude’s words, but we all know it’s true. Tennant will get out of this. It just might take longer than any of us want to admit, but now isn’t the time to bring doubt into the situation, not when we all need to be level-headed.

“What has Hollis said?”

Jude shakes his head at my question, as Roman grips the edge of the desk and hangs his head again. “He’s locked himself in his office. After the news broke, he kicked me out and closed the door, claiming he and Leandro can’t have any distractions, but...”

But he’s spiraling . I don’t need Jude to finish his sentence to know the truth. Tennant may be the one most people worry about, but it’s Hollis we should all be afraid of. We’ve already seen once that he doesn’t do well without Tennant, but this is more than just a simple kidnapping.

Before, the threat was mostly an annoyance—aside from the bastards having Il Padrone and Cristian—now it feels as if they’re on our doorstep, and there’s only so much we can do when they have the law behind them. Though...rules were always meant to be broken.

If the cops want to play games, well, we’ll give them what they want.

“Keep trying to get through to him,” Roman tells Jude. “I...I can’t worry about him right now.”

Jude reaches for Roman once more and the boy melts into his embrace, going from clutching at the desk to clutching his lover.

“There’s nothing else we can do tonight,” I say carefully. “Our people are getting secure. The contingency plans we had in place are there for a reason and they’re working. No one else has been picked up, though updates from both our people and the Martellis’ say they’ve fallen for the blinds we’ve set up. You should rest.”

“I can’t sleep. There’s too much to do.”

“There will always be something to do, Roman,” I say gently. “You can’t do anything about Tennant, not tonight. Our men and the Martellis’ know what to do. I’ll stay up until Enzo returns with his report.

“Leandro and Hollis are working on figuring out how tonight’s ambush went under our radar. Even with the police being bought off by the asshole after us, someone should have known and informed us. I refuse to believe we’ve lost our entire foothold in the locals. A dirty cop is a dirty cop. Not everyone wants ‘justice’ and ‘eradication’, or whatever it was that asshole was spouting.”

“None of that does us any good now,” Roman spits. “Tennant and Joel are still in police custody, and I feel as if I’m losing this Family with each passing moment. How can I rescue Dad if I can’t even keep my lover out of jail?”

“This is just a blip,” Jude reassures him. “We’ll get past it, and they’ll pay for their crimes.”

Roman snorts at his wording, but I’m on Jude’s side. It’s not the end of the world, it only feels that way for right now.

“Go to bed, Roman,” I try suggesting again. “Even for just a few hours. You’ll be

useless to us all if you're running on fumes. I promise, if anything happens, I'll get you right away. But neither Ten nor your father would want you working yourself into the ground for them; they care too much about you for that."

Tears fill his eyes as more tension leaves him, and he leans heavily against Jude. His walls are starting to finally crack, and one day soon, everything he's been holding back will come rushing out. Leaks have already sprouted, but I know him well enough to be sure that the insecurities he's voiced thus far are barely scratching the surface.

"You swear on Dad's life?"

"Yes," I reply firmly. "Trust me, Figlio Mio. Il mondo sarà ancora in fiamme dopo un pisolino."

He lets out a watery snort, but finally nods. "Okay, fine. You win."

He pulls away from Jude and rounds the desk. Opening my arms, I hug him close, soaking up the boy I helped raise into the man he is today. Right now, he's the last physical reminder I have of my husband. Because despite the reassurance I give Roman, I too am scrambling at straws, trying to hold myself together. I've just had years more practice at it than he has.

"Ti voglio bene, Roman," I whisper. "Go rest, Figlio Mio. I'll hold down the fort, okay?"

He clutches at me for a moment longer before nodding. "Okay. Thank you...Dad. For everything. I love you."

My breath catches as my own tears form. I've been a part of Roman's life for ten years now, and he's never called me that. I know he's my son as much as Cristian's,

but hearing it from him...

Pressing a kiss to his hair, I hold him a little tighter, taking a moment to reset myself.

Cristian, you need to come home. We both need you.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

I run out of my room—no, it's Ignacio's now. My mind is focused on Tennant, and I'm almost to the front door before my arm is caught. I whirl around, ready to fight, but pull to a stop at Lio's expression. My friend shakes his head when I go to say something, and instead, tugs me to his office. Once we get in there, he pushes me towards a chair and closes the door behind us.

“You can't just run out.” He sits on the edge of his desk, staring at me with sympathy. “For one, you're my Second. You are needed here—especially with the cops still trying to go after us. Additionally, showing up frantically at the Amatos' isn't going to help anything. You can contact them and express your willingness to help. Fuck, I don't care what it is, but you absolutely cannot leave right now. I'm sorry. I didn't realize you cared this much for him.”

“I...I didn't either,” I respond weakly. I'm not sure where my mind is right now. I know my best friend is right. He's the Boss for a reason, but fuck if I don't hate this. “Maybe I could at least call Hollis? Or someone?”

“Hollis is going to be way too busy. I'll be off and on with Roman as we navigate this. He has a large undertaking. If you want to talk with someone, I can get you a small window with him—but only if you can find something to offer.”

“Fuck. How the hell should I know?” I growl, gripping my hair. “He has everyone he needs already.”

Lio taps the side of the desk, waiting on me. I recoil in horror when I catch his meaning. “Fuck! No. Absolutely not. That... No.”

“Fine, then I need you to start coordinating with everyone else. I want Marcus and Keegan updated. And, I’m sorry, but you also are going to need to work with Ignacio. I’ll be checking with Sarah later to see if I can get Luca on a plane and out of here.”

Grinding my teeth, I glare at Lio, but he doesn’t back down. He never does. I deflate under his steady gaze, giving in to him. “Fine. Give him a call. But this does not mean I like him.”

Lio doesn’t make a comment as he grabs his phone. Part of me is happy to see him at ease with these parts of the job. The other part would do anything to protect him from what he’s going through. I’m ashamed he’s having to put things aside for me, but...

“I don’t have time for this ,” Roman’s voice snaps out.

“I know,” Lio says calmly. “But I have someone who wants to talk to you—briefly.”

Roman makes a noise of agreement and I hesitate, even though I’m the one who agreed to do this. Lio gave me the choice. Taking a deep breath, I push forward.

“I...I’m worried. I know you are as well. What can I do? Not only to help Tennant, but to help you, Hollis, and Jude.”

I cringe and glare at Lio. He knows how much I fucking dislike Roman, and now I’m offering him my personal help? Plus Hollis and Jude?

“I have everything covered .” Roman’s voice is taunt, and I glance up at the ceiling. I know exactly what the fuck is going on here.

“Roman, you are doing an amazing job. I’m only offering because I...care.” I press my hand to my heart, trying not to acknowledge that I feel like the world is crashing down around me. Hating that I’m having to practically beg to help. “If anything, I

could help coordinate with Jude on things.”

“Fine. And to answer your unasked question, we don’t know anything else yet. He’s still in processing, we’ll find out more tomorrow morning. You can get in touch with Jude. Maybe you can actually prove you learned something from Tennant.”

Roman ends the call and I slump in the chair, staring at Lio. “Look, I know you’re not a Roman fan, but right now, he’s the only way you’ll get answers, or access to Tennant. You can coordinate with Jude as time allows, but I need you to be here for me—or is this Family no longer your priority?”

It hurts to see my friend’s face so blank. I know he’d let me leave if I really needed to, even if it kills him inside. “You are still my priority. After all, friendship rules require it.”

Lio finally smiles, exhaling in relief. “I’ll accept friendship rules on this. Because I need you.”

“So does the rest of the Family, I’m sure. Someone has to keep you sane,” I tease.

“True. Now, the cops tried to pick Marcus up, but since they fell for the blind, nothing could be done. I’m hoping that gives some caution, but you never know. We need to somehow increase security on the locations that aren’t a blind, without being seen.”

I lean back in the chair, trying to force my mind away from Tennant—or, at least, only allowing a small portion to worry about him. “I hate to say it, but what if we reach out to one of the suppliers.”

“Fuck. You want to see about bringing in one of the gangs, or the fucking Cartel, to give us security? Do you know how much that will fucking cost? And how do we get

them out afterwards? Master would kill me.” Lio stands up and starts pacing, his hands tightening into fists and then loosening.

“I don’t see a choice. We can’t be seen, but they can... The cops aren’t going after them at all. They’re putting all their focus on us. So, let’s throw them off even more.”

I study my friend as he continues to pace, noting the way his shoulders slump and the dark circles below his eyes. It hits me then that I should have been paying more attention before. At least I’m here now.

“Fuck. Well, the Jamaican gang sold out the Amatos. I don’t want us to be caught with our pants down, so you need to very carefully vet if we’re going that way.” Lio pinches the bridge of his nose as he whirls to a stop. “And offer enough of an incentive.”

“I’ll get with Marcus and see which ones would be a good fit. Then you can think of an incentive.” I stand and head toward the door, but Lio blocks me.

Huffing, he pulls me into a hug. “We’ll get Tennant back. Anything the Amatos need, we’ll help. You get in touch with Jude.”

“Thank you.” I rest my head on his shoulder before he gently pushes me away.

“Don’t thank me yet. You’ll also need to run this idea by Ignacio after you talk with Marcus.” My knees go weak at the very thought, and it’s sheer willpower that keeps me upright. Lio gives me an approving nod. “Oh, and in case I forgot to mention, we’re back to doing family meals. Now, get out of here. I need to go deal with Sarah and the bane of my existence. Hopefully, I can get him on a plane.”

I smile sadly, not able to even laugh about Luca. All I want to do is curl up in bed. I’ll get there eventually, but I know sleep won’t come easy. Between Tennant being

arrested, and mine and Ignacio's breakup... Fuck. Maybe I should just be like Lio and live on coffee. I don't need the nightmares tonight.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

Roman is staring off into space in the middle of the closet by the time I get out of the shower. The two hours of very interrupted rest I managed to get him to take are over now, and it's back to work on the things we can control while we wait for news on the stuff we can't.

Quickly, I run some product through my hair, knowing the curls are going to be unmanageable once they dry, but now isn't the time to worry about trivial things such as hair care when Tennant got himself arrested. Still, part of being Roman's Second means putting my best face forward, which means at least attempting to not look like a troll person.

That done, I grab a random suit, not even paying attention to if it's mine or Hollis's; we're the same height, so the only difference is the shirt and jacket would be snug if I end up with one of his. We need a bigger fucking closet, I think as I carefully pull the suit out from between all the others. Even with the bulk of Roman's "fun" clothes still in his childhood bedroom, our closet was not meant for four grown men's wardrobes.

Quickly, I dress and grab a suit off the rack for Roman. "Here," I voice, handing him the blood-red skirt suit, hoping it'll help bolster his spirits a little. "Come on, we have work to do. You know he wouldn't want you to be upset over him."

Roman swallows and seems to come back to himself, the lost expression is replaced with a hardness I never expected to see on his face—one he didn't even have when he thought about killing me.

He buttons the shirt and then asks, "Has Benjamin contacted you yet?"

I shake my head. “I’ll get in touch if I don’t hear from him soon. I’m sure they have just as much shit to deal with.”

Roman laughs, and while I can’t hear it without my hearing aids, the look on his face tells me it’s not a pleasant sound. “As if whatever they have is on the same level as the shit we were just handed.”

His signs are sharp, his expression hard, and I am so out of my depth. Fucking hell of a time for Hollis to have a breakdown on top of Roman’s.

I always knew Hollis would take it the hardest if anything ever happened to Ten, but I didn’t expect him to shut us out, literally. Working or not, there’s a wall between the three of us that wasn’t ever there before.

I understand it's hard. But as much as Tennant being arrested pisses me off, and makes me want to take my cane to some asshole’s skull, I know how to shove those urges down—for now. I guess one thing I can thank my upbringing for is the compartmentalization of my feelings—or lack of them.

The fact that I am the functioning one right now is actually pretty fucking terrifying, considering I have zero clue as to what I'm doing. Tennant is our emotional rock, while Hollis holds our leashes together. With neither of them being available...it doesn't leave much room for error, or Roman’s fracturing sanity.

Roman waving his hand in my peripheral brings me out of my head and I look at him. He motions towards the bedroom. “Phone, think it’s yours.”

Right. Work. Roman—the entire Family—is counting on me.

Before following Roman out of the closet, I grab him as he turns, bringing him in close and pressing a hard kiss to his lips. “We’ll bring him home,” I say aloud.

He nods and lets out a long breath, but when I release him, any lingering doubts or anxiety are gone, and he's wearing the mask of Boss that I've gotten used to since this whole shitshow started.

We finally leave the closet, and Roman exits the bathroom entirely, while I grab my hearing aids from the counter before going in search of my phone.

Before even bothering to check the notifications, I send a message to my group chat with Soren and the trips.

JUDE

I need an interpreter.

SOREN

We figured. Doc and I are already here, I'll assist.

JUDE

Good. Meet me in Ten's office.

That done, I grab my cane and exit the room, only to find my main bodyguard, Killian, waiting for me. "What are you doing?" I ask, heading down the hall.

"I'm to 'stick to your side like fucking glue'. Boss's orders, sir."

I huff but don't say anything, knowing it'd be pointless. Roman's nerves are shot to hell, so I'm not surprised he's implemented bodyguards, even though we're safe as can be in the main house.

“We’re working out of Tennant’s office for now,” I tell him. “Soren is meeting me there so he can interpret.”

“I’m sorry I’m no help there,” he says.

I roll my eyes. “You’re doing fine. You’re learning, catching up. Besides, I’m pretty sure Ten would rather you guard me properly over trying to interpret. We’re making do for now.”

He concedes, and we make it to Tennant’s office to find Soren already leaning against the wall outside it. It’s not surprising he got there so quickly, if he was in Doc’s office, as that’s only a few halls away. Tennant’s office is just beyond Cristian’s, in what Roman once explained was a room used as Cristian and Tennant’s classroom when they were kids.

While the room isn’t as large as Cristian’s office, it’s a decent enough size for a desk, two visitors chairs, and a bookshelf full of romance books—I learned those are Doc’s when I asked after seeing them for the first time.

“Thanks for agreeing to do this,” I tell Soren as he and I enter the office, while Killian stays in the hall.

“No problem, happy to help. It gives me something to do besides imagining new ways to punish Doc.”

I laugh as I sit behind the desk. “Don’t lie, you like doing that.”

He smiles and shrugs before signing, “Living with a brat, you have to get...inventive. But that’s not what he needs right now.”

“What does he need?”

A look that has a hint of Daddy in it crosses his face. “The only two people he really considers family are gone, and his best friend’s brother is as well. Like hell was he going to stay home and wait for news.”

I nod in understanding. “So James is here too, then?”

“Yes, partly because of Joel, but also because of the orders for all personal bodyguards to be on their principles. Jayden is here, too.”

I hold back my sigh. Of course, I don’t blame Joel’s brothers for being worried about him, but dammit, that’s more people to account for should something happen here. Just because they haven’t managed to procure a warrant to search the house yet doesn’t mean they won’t. We’re living on borrowed time, and everyone knows it.

With that reminder, I pull my phone out and look at Soren. “I can get away with FaceTiming one of the many, many calls I’m sure I’m going to need to make, as he knows ASL; though I haven’t actually tested his fluency. The rest, I’m going to need your help with.”

Soren shrugs. “It’s what I’m here for.”

“Still, I hate taking you away from Doc and James when they need you.”

Soren’s bright blue eyes seem to glow as he says, “The Family comes first, always. I know how it works. I’m just sorry we haven’t been able to find you an actual interpreter yet.”

I shrug. “It’s kind of a big ask. Not only do they need to know how to interpret, they have to be okay with the Family as well.”

“I know. Donovan got by without one in the Bratva for the same reasons, but then his

job description is way different than yours.”

“You, Dmitri, and Dominic have been a big help. There’s plenty of time to worry about finding the perfect person later.” If we live that long.

Finally checking my phone, I quickly send off replies to the various texts before getting to Benjamin’s message. Though I was expecting him to get in touch, the dark, twisted part of me that still lives under my family’s thumb tells me it’s a mistake. He shouldn’t be contacting me Second to Second, because I shouldn’t have the job.

It’s bullshit, of course. I’m here to support Roman in whatever he needs, and while I might not care, or have an unending well of emotions like he does, I still have my own baggage.

I don’t doubt my abilities, but I do doubt my usefulness to Roman if other people have an issue with me. I spent too long trying to disappear into the background, I won’t return there now that I’ve found people who see me. I just hope it doesn’t fall back on Roman too much. His confidence as a Boss is already low on the best of days.

Going back to Benjamin’s message, I finally send him a reply, confident that even though it’s the middle of the night, he’s as awake and on edge as the rest of us.

BENJAMIN

When you get a moment, I’d like to discuss how we can help the Amatos.

JUDE

I’ll call in a minute.

Looking up at Soren, I ask, “If I angle the camera correctly, would you come sit over here? Just so we’re both able to pay attention to what he says. While he’s on our side—on Tennant’s side—you can never be too careful.”

Soren nods quickly and moves his chair, while I set the computer up for a video call with Benjamin. A strange feeling of...anticipation rushes over me as I hit Call . This is my first-ever act as Roman’s Second—not counting Tennant’s test right before our first torture lesson.

The call connects to show a haggard-looking Benjamin, very different from the tired but fucked-out boy from just hours ago. Though, I suppose, we all look more worn down than we did earlier tonight.

“Thank you for meeting with me,” he says. “I know it’s a...difficult time for you.”

I laugh bitterly. “Difficult is one way to put it. What are you hoping to get out of this call, exactly?” I cut straight to the chase, too tired and full of emotions I’d rather not examine to beat around the bush.

He sucks in a breath and runs a hand through his dark hair, looking away from the camera for a moment as he gathers himself. Under any other circumstance, the “normal” part of me would say to have some compassion for him. After all, it’s not everyday you go from your...lover’s bed to a literal nightmare. But the civilized gentleman my mother raised disappeared hours ago.

“I want to offer my support...in any way I can. I...can’t be there right now, but I still want to help.” His sea green eyes try to plead with me through the screen. “Please, I...care about Tennant. Much more than I ever expected.”

As he signs, I tilt my head, carefully watching his hands, not for his words, but...for the missing piece of jewelry. So he gave back the ring...interesting.

And not at all what I expected. In truth, I thought he'd go home and realize Tennant isn't someone he wants to be involved with.

"Are those feelings going to be a problem?" I ask bluntly.

"No," he replies firmly, snapping his fingers closed even as he mouths the word. "I can push my feelings to the side." And then he shakes his head. "Wait, no, no I can't. But...it's because of my feelings for him that I'm willing to do whatever it takes to help."

I let out a breath, some of my tension eases at the knowledge he's unwilling to lie just to remain in the loop. "Right now, we're shoring up our defenses and going quiet. We have no idea where they might hit next. Especially since we were betrayed by what we thought were loyal customers."

His expression darkens. "I wouldn't mind using some of my new skills on those assholes."

I grin, a bit of lightness seeping through the dark fills me. "We can't make a move yet, at least not an overt one. You and I both know they'll be watching their informants closely. But that's the plan, eventually. We'll probably have to keep one alive for Ten, but nothing says we can't have some fun as well."

Benjamin's grin isn't as dark or unhinged as any others' in this life, but...there's an edge to it that wasn't there just a few short days ago. "Good."

"If you haven't already, I'd suggest putting extra protections in on your diversions and blinds."

He loses his smile. "Already on it. They tried to grab Marcus, and it was only because of said blinds that they didn't."

“I’m not surprised, it was a coordinated attack. They’ve proven they’ll do anything to take apart what we have—we need to stay ahead of them and prove them wrong.”

Benjamin squirms in his seat, as if weighing up his words, before saying, “I’ve suggested we bring in a...different kind of distraction. Keep them busy with something—someone—else while we pull the rug out from under them.”

I nod slowly. “Could work.”

“It’s still in the works. I have to run it by both Marcus and...Ignacio.” I don’t miss the way he grimaces as he signs his fiancé...ex-fiancé’s name.

Soren gets my attention, and I look away from the screen to watch him say, “If he’s implying what I think he is, I believe I can help...”

I raise an eyebrow and roll my wrist in a “go on” motion.

He hesitates for only a moment before saying, “My uncle has always had a good relationship with the Amatos. Since Cristian... acquired me, the ties between them have only strengthened. If Benjamin’s idea is to distract the police with a new target...”

Keeping my hands low and out of sight of the camera, I ask, “You really think your uncle will go for it?”

Soren shrugs. “It doesn’t hurt to ask. He and Cristian are allies, and I’m still his nephew. The entire point of me changing Families was to keep me safe; I’d say being arrested is as far from safe as you can get. Especially looking like me.” He gestures to his young, angelic face. “I would be fucking catnip in prison.”

I snort, because that’s the truth. Doc’s Daddy he may be, but everything from his

light blond hair and freckles, to his short and slim frame, screams “use me like the twink I am”.

“Good point. Thank you.” I turn back to Benjamin. “I have an idea, I’ll need to run it by Roman first, but we might be able to help with the distraction.”

“Okay. I’m assuming I won’t be getting details?”

I smile. “As I said, I need to speak with Roman. It’s his call, as it’ll cost us.”

“So will my idea.”

“But if it’s valid, does it matter?” I stare straight at him through the screen, our eyes locking as a new sense of determination fills me. “Getting Tennant out, finding our Bosses, and putting those bastards back in their places is the priority. I will do anything for that end goal.”

“Me too.”

I hope that’s true, because something tells me the promises we make now will come back to haunt us in the not so distant future...

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

Family breakfast is wrapping up, and both Keegan and I have our eyes on Benjamin and Ignacio. By the look of it, things went fucking sideways. Nobody commented on the lack of an engagement ring on Benjamin's finger—or the fact Ignacio is still wearing his. But fuck, this cannot be good. We do not need a fracture in the Family right now.

Standing up to leave, Keegan lightly knocks his shoulder against mine, tilting his head toward Ignacio and then Benjamin. Sighing, I run my fingers through my hair, not wanting to deal with this shit. Being an adult fucking sucks, and as War, I'm the one who needs to rein in Chaos. I stride toward him as Keegan pivots toward Benjamin.

"Hey, let's get some time on the mats," I say as I grab Ignacio's arm, pulling him out of the dining room without giving him a choice. Normally we'd avoid the gym right afterwards, but Ignacio barely ate and I had my breakfast a while ago with Cole.

"I don't think?—"

"Nope, no excuses here. We need some time to spar. It'll help get me in the mindset for today. Especially after they tried to arrest me last night." I'm not even lying necessarily. I do need to work off some aggression. He just doesn't need to know that Keegan already took care of most of it.

"Fine," he grumbles as he pulls his arm away from me.

We don't speak on the way, which suits me fine. I'd rather he go off on me in the relative privacy of the gym.

It's early enough that when we enter there are no other guards training, which is a relief. I'd give it an hour before they start to trickle in after the change of guard happens. As soon as we hit the mats, I'm on him. I sweep out his leg, bringing him down.

He jumps up and snarls at me, "Asshole! I wasn't even ready!"

"Since when did that matter? You taught me to always be prepared. Walking in front of me? Not being aware of danger? That's not like you at all. So you have two choices. Either tell me what the fuck is going on, or I'll beat it out of you."

Without a word, he jumps toward me, but I quickly evade him. I snap around, getting a punch in on his side. It doesn't stop him, but I didn't expect it to. It fuels his anger, which is what I want—and need.

"Come on. You're better than this. I've never known you to be sloppy."

I can see my words hit their target, and he makes the dangerous mistake of closing his eyes from the emotional pain he's experiencing. Sighing, I step up and punch him, pommeling him when he won't fight back.

Skipping back, I growl, "Fight. Fucking. Back. Or have you given up? Do I need to take you out completely? Because right now, you're of no fucking use to anyone."

That snaps him out of whatever pity party he's under, and when he opens his eyes, they're brutally cold. Thank fuck. My relief quickly dissipates as he comes at me. Shit . Now I remember why this fucker trains the guards.

I try to evade his punches, but I'm not fast enough. Every time I move to get my own hit in, he blocks it easily. It pisses me off how fucking effortless he makes this look. He's not being careful at all, or pulling his punches, and my body feels it. I don't

want to think about how many bruises I'll have, and fuck—that engagement ring cut the hell out of my mouth.

Taking a deep breath, I jump at him, hoping it'll throw him off. He laughs as I try to tackle him, quickly changing our direction until I'm down on the ground and he's on top of me. He's got one arm across my neck and a knee at my balls.

I slap the mats, and for a moment, I don't think he's going to let me go. When he does, he drops down, lying next to me. Both of us are covered in sweat and blood. I hate to note that I'm bloodier than him. Fucker.

“Alright, fucking tell me what's going on.” I shove him none too gently as a reminder that I'll beat his ass if he doesn't explain—or at least attempt to.

Ignacio shrugs as he stares at the wall. “Benjamin broke up with me.”

“Really?” I say sarcastically. “I never would have guessed. The whole ‘no longer wearing his engagement ring’ didn't tip me off at all. What I want to know is why?”

“Why do I like you?” Ignacio scowls before his whole body slumps. “I fucked up and didn't listen. I didn't train him, or believe in him enough. And then he found fucking Tennant.”

I whistle quietly. “Tennant. Huh. That's...surprising.”

“Trust me, I saw the video. It...was more than just sex. I could tell, even if I desperately wanted it to be otherwise.”

Ignacio drops his head, defeat radiating from him. I wince because I can't imagine watching Keegan with another man that isn't one of us.

“When he came back...he walked away. And then when Tennant got arrested, he ran from the room. Never even looked back.” Ignacio’s voice cracks and I reach out, patting his shoulder.

Fuck . That’s worse than I thought. “I don’t mean any offense with this, but...why didn’t you train him? I’ve never known you to leave anyone untrained.”

“Fuck. I...I couldn’t see him as a target. Especially after Jax. I had been training him. And then after being kidnapped... Shit. I didn’t know if he was alive or not.

“I watched him be tortured...for me. He begged to be tortured instead of me. Did you know he still has nightmares? Tell me, what the fuck would you do? I’m the one who got him into this mess. I’m the one who took him from his nice, safe life and brought him into this world.”

“First, you didn’t bring him in, Il Padrone did. You simply helped with the kidnapping. And despite what happened, Benjamin chose to stay. He became his own brand of crazy, just like Lio.

“As for the other thing... I don’t know. I can’t imagine how I’d react. I can see why you struggled, but you fucked up.”

Ignacio stands up and starts pacing while I stay there quietly. He finally stops mid-pace and whirls toward me, pain seeping into his voice. “You think I don’t know that? You think hearing it from him last night didn’t tear me into pieces?”

“So...what are you going to do? I need you fucking present to help us find Il Padrone. We’re being hit over and over by these fucking LEOs, and haven’t had any spare time to actually look for Il Padrone. You’re our Chaos. We need you. And despite what’s going on between you and Benjamin, he needs you too.” It’s a low blow, manipulating his love for Benjamin, but it’s the only option I have right now.

“You’re right. Let’s get cleaned up and figure out what the hell we need to do next.”

I nod in satisfaction. I want to ask if he plans to get Benjamin back, but I bite my tongue. There will be time to ask that later, but right now, he’s barely holding himself together.

Fuck . I don’t want to have to take sides in this. I wish Il Padrone was here, he’d have an idea. Then again, if he hadn't been kidnapped, Benjamin would never have gotten so close to Tennant...

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

Being labeled as a “problem” should probably worry me. Of course, I know that’s not the official word, as they’re keeping my current situation pretty hush hush, but the singular holding cell isolating me away from everything and everyone is pretty telling, as is the way the officers keep side-eyeing me.

I know for a fact that my record is sealed, but the court-ordered therapy is still in effect, and I’m sure looking up my name would show that there’s something in my past, even if they’re not privy to what that is. I’d be flattered by the caution they’re showing if I weren’t so annoyed.

Apparently, the people on my “case” can’t speak with me until my therapist gets here to assure them I have the capacity to understand what I’m being charged with—lovely. This is going to earn me more mandated sessions, because that’s just what I have time for.

For half a minute, I wonder how far I could get if I attempted to break out of my...five-star accommodations here, but dismiss the idea. It’s one thing to be arrested on weapons trafficking charges, it’s a whole other to add on attempted escape, too. Cristian is already going to have a field day with me if he ever finds out about this, so it’s best not to make it any worse.

Each second that passes is one where I have to curb the impulse to just say “fuck it”. I don’t have time to wait around for the police to do things the “legal” way. I suppose, since they’ve got me where they think they want me, they can take their sweet ass time. After all, it’s not really me they want, but my Boss; something they will never get—even if he wasn’t currently kidnapped.

The heavy door down the hall opens and an officer walks through it, his footsteps echoing around the cold expanse between us. “Your lawyer and therapist are here for you,” the officer sneers.

Sighing, I stand and move from the uncomfortable cot to the sliding cell door. He locks the cuffs on my wrists tighter than they need to be, and I scowl at him. Glancing at his name badge, I commit it and his face to memory, to go alongside the others currently on my list.

We’re going to have a hell of a time wading through who was “just doing their job” and who was on the side of “wants to die”. So far, there are more people on the second list than there should be. Hollis is not going to be happy about vetting so many in order to tell me who actually needs to die or not.

I’m led into a small, windowless room that contains nothing but a metal table and chairs. I roll my eyes at the cliché of it all. It’s like they purposefully are giving me the worst options imaginable because they want me to snap. I might be losing it, but I have more control than that.

The two people in the room are the last ones I want to see, but they’re better than the hostility that I’ve been experiencing for the last fourteen or so hours.

Kian Sinclair is as tall, dark, and handsome as he was when Cristian first put him on the payroll years ago. His dark eyes are reminiscent of Cristian’s, and for a moment, a weird pang of some type of emotion I’ve never examined before rushes through me as I look into them. Wanting to avoid whatever that is, I look away from the lawyer to the current therapist I’ve been terrorizing.

The most-recent person they’ve saddled me with is so close to breaking, I can taste it, but with this new development, I might have to start again. Another reason certain people need to die.

“Aren’t my sessions supposed to be private?” I drawl, taking a seat across from them both.

Sinclair gives me a barely-there smile. “I’m here to read the charges against you before Ms. Rhodes takes over and makes sure you understand them.”

“Sounds like a party, let’s get this over with.”

The blonde haired brown eyed therapist stares at me intently, and I pretend to listen as Sinclair reads over the charges against me. It’s a disappointingly short list as I didn’t fight them at any point. Really, the weapons trafficking, while serious, isn’t something I’m terribly worried about.

No, I eye the therapist who isn’t hiding how fascinating she finds me. I’m not worried about the actual charge they have on me, but the fact they’re going to try to use my past against me.

Fucking Sergio Amato. Thirty-plus years later and his bullshit is still making my life difficult. Cristian should have let me torture him when I asked. His kill or not, I think it would have been fair.

“Are you paying attention, Tennant?” Sinclair asks sharply.

“Yes, and I understand the seriousness of the situation. My question is: what are you going to do about it?”

When I meet his gaze, I see nothing but dark intent that would probably scare someone who didn’t grow up with Cristian. He shifts slightly in his chair, moving his body weight toward the therapist next to him, and I bite back a sigh.

That he doesn’t trust her enough to even give a hint of whatever plan he and the

Family are cooking up to get me out of here is...concerning. And means I was right about starting over with the whole “break the therapist until she quits” thing.

“I will be back later to discuss our options,” Sinclair says, standing and buttoning his suit jacket. “Please let me know if you need anything that might help our case, Ms. Rhodes.”

“Certainly.” She smiles sickly sweet up at him. “I do appreciate you and all your support. Tennant needs people in his corner.”

“Still in the room,” I tell them mildly.

The therapist turns to me with an apologetic smile, while Sinclair rolls his eyes behind her back.

“I’ll bring you food, and maybe a blanket, if you’re lucky,” Sinclair says on his way out the door.

I’d take offense to his tone if I wasn’t used to it by now, and he wasn’t so good at his job. Sometimes, he fits in a little too well with the rest of us. Cristian hired him for a reason, after all.

When the lawyer is gone, the therapist turns her full attention on me...joy.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

“O h, stop being a damn baby,” Dr. Ranlen snaps as she checks my stitches.

I growl, but shut up when she turns those steely gray eyes on me. Fuck .

“Perhaps if you let me have some pain relievers?” I grit out, tired of this shit already.

I move, only to cringe from the pain. Fucking Hollis. Those damn Amatos. What the fuck is Lio thinking working with them? Just because their asshole of a leader got kidnapped, doesn’t mean we should care.

“Leave her be.” Lio strolls in and glances at me, quickly dismissing my situation.

“Seriously? I’m here to help and you don’t give a shit? You should have broken from the Amatos as soon as they crossed the line and fucking stabbed me!”

His bored look doesn’t change. “Dr. Ranlen is treating you enough to get you on the fucking plane, so you can go back to what you’re supposed to be doing. Il Padrone had you in place at his cousin’s for a fucking reason, and you know that. Hell, I’m surprised you’re not getting calls, because it’s such a fucking delicate situation. And fuck knows he does not need to come home to a headache.”

I cringe, not wanting to acknowledge that I’ve had several missed calls from the mafia Boss I’m supposed to be taking care of—permanently. I left abruptly and didn’t follow up, which put me in a precarious position. But fuck, I have the longest history with Il Padrone, and damn if I wanted to entrust his safety to Lio, despite the agreed upon hierarchy.

“Fuck!” Lio snarls as he starts to pace. “You don’t even need to say the words. It’s obvious you’re fucking up, again, and now we need to come up with a plan to fix this shit.”

He whirls around and glares at me. I lean back at his wordless growl, hating being on the examination table. There’s nowhere for me to move, and when Lio is in this mood, it’s dangerous. I have no idea why Benjamin calls him a homicidal teddy bear. Homicidal? Yes, but a teddy bear? The man in front of me gives no inclination of that.

“I’ve already fixed one hole in him, I don’t want to fix another,” Dr. Ranlen drawls, appearing unfazed by what’s going on. Then again, I haven’t been her favorite for quite a while.

Lio grunts in agreement and waves his hand in acknowledgment. Studying me with a sharp look, Lio exhales deeply. “Against my current feelings, I’m not going to kill you. Master gave an order, and unlike you, I can follow them. However, while he wants you alive, he also wants you to do your fucking job, which means getting your ass on a plane. I’ll have one of the guards take you, and they will be responsible for making sure you get on the fucking plane. So, if you don’t want them to die, you’ll do what I’m telling you.”

“I can’t just leave! Not without finding Il Padrone!” I sputter.

There’s no fucking way. If he thinks I’m just going to skip on my way, he’s more insane than I thought he was—and I’ve questioned his sanity for a long time.

“You can, and you will.” Lio’s steely voice softens as he continues, “Look, despite so much evidence to the contrary, I know that you care deeply for Master. Due to this, I personally promise to keep you up-to-date, and if we need you, I’ll recall you immediately.”

I grind my teeth, looking around the room but not seeing anything. This entire situation... Fuck. I know that's the best offer I'll get, though. If I press, Lio will shut me down—hard.

With a slight incline of my head, I snap, "Fine, I agree. I need to be kept up-to-date though. It's important."

"Yes, whatever. I understand." Lio's shoulders slump in relief, and I briefly feel sorry for him.

This isn't an easy life, and his current position certainly doesn't make it any easier. Huffing, I decide to be kind. After all, what he's doing now is all thanks to my training.

"You are doing fine. You've been prepared for this. And although I'm a better candidate than Benjamin, I do believe he's the next best choice for you. Hopefully, Tennant was able to actually train him."

Narrowing his eyes at me, Lio goes to say something before shaking his head. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he doesn't even look at me. "Luca...just get on the plane and go. I'll call you when I have any information. I'm assuming he's good to leave today, Dr. Ranlen?"

"Eh, use the private plane. He'll live." Sarah looks at her nails, like she doesn't care whether I do make it back to my assignment alive or not. At least leaving means I'm no longer in danger from her scalpels.

"Very well. Have a safe trip. Once you're finished here, Tony will take you to the plane. I'll call now and have it ready for when you get there."

Lio doesn't wait for my reply before he turns and exits the room. Dr. Ranlen coughs,

trying to cover up her amusement. I roll my eyes at her and her expression shifts quickly. I swallow at the anger flashing in those eyes.

“Alright, you’re done. Get your shirt back on, pack your shit, and get out of here. Do what Allesandro ordered you to, and maybe he won’t want to kill you when he comes back. Although, you know what side I’ll be on.”

“Jesus. I made one mistake and you all act like I’m a horrible person,” I mutter as I put my shirt on.

“One? Do you want my list?”

I keep my mouth closed and step outside the room, finding Tony there waiting. I clasp his shoulder. “Well, it’s time for me to get out of here. It appears they think they can do this without me. Perhaps you can call me when they run into problems?”

Tony doesn’t say a word, he just gestures for me to lead the way. I roll my shoulders and shake my head. They’ll learn, and when they do, I’ll be back. Hopefully, in time to save Il Padrone...

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

Once again in our captor's idea of an interrogation room, I lean back in the chair, ignoring the way my guards shift at every movement I make. I'd like them to spend days chained up and restless, then try to sit still once finally given the opportunity to do so. It's as if none of them know how the human body works, and they just expect me to not need to move around and try to stretch out my aching muscles.

Flexing my hands, I hold back my wince as the wound from my missing index finger throbs. Those idiots think they've hindered me by taking my trigger finger, what they don't know is it's one of the easiest to adapt to living without. My middle finger will quickly take its place. They probably thought taking my pinkie would be too easy, but if they got their heads out of their asses long enough to do a bit of research, they'd know that's the one I'd struggle to live without the most.

Roman and I can match now, at least. Though, unlike him, I'm not left handed, so it's a bit more inconvenient to have lost a finger on my right hand.

"Is there a point to this?" I ask my silent guards. "If you wanted to bore me to death, you could have left me in my cell."

No response, which is typical. Shaking my head in disgust, I relax my muscles, appearing nonchalant, even as the wait begins to grate on my already frayed nerves. The masked assholes clad in dark clothes don't appear to be affected, and that just won't do. If I'm slowly being driven crazy, they can be too.

Under my breath, I begin singing "Up On The House Top", because if Carter gets to drive me crazy with Christmas music, I should be able to gift everyone else the same experience.

One of the guards gets twitchy, and he shifts from foot to foot as the singing gets progressively louder. His partner takes a step forward, as if he's going to actually do something to me, but before he gets the chance, the door opens and our host steps into the room.

The guards remain still, but I finish the song before going quiet.

My host grins, the smile doing nothing for his bland looks. "You think you're so clever? That you're the one in charge here?"

I shrug. "Someone has to be."

He chuckles and tosses a newspaper onto the table. "And it's not you."

Narrowing my eyes, I grab the newspaper and scan the headline: Arrests Made In Weapons Trafficking Takedown. Fear shoots through me as I scan the front page article.

Putting the paper down, I stare up at the asshole who is manically grinning at me.

"Still think you can get out of this?" he asks in a low tone.

Leaning back in my seat, I shrug and act unaffected. "You just made the most critical error you could have," I inform him. Letting a smile curve over my lips, I do my best to hide the fear and anger that's coursing through me. "I hope you don't have any family who will want to bury your body; there won't even be ash left once Ten is finished with you."

Anger flashes in his eyes and he slaps the table with both hands, leaning over it and getting in my face. "There's no scenario in which you get out of this in one piece."

I hold up my bandaged wound. “Obviously. If you think that means you will...” I shrug. “You're more out of your mind than we've given you credit for.”

He sneers. “I can't wait until you're standing in the ashes of everything you've built, and I finally get to put a bullet in your head.”

I grin. “If that's a threat...it needs work.”

His face flushes red at my lack of reaction, and he surges away from the table. “Put him back where he belongs,” he orders.

Once he's gone, his goons move, grabbing my arms and roughly yanking me up. The anger running through me is hard to contain—so I don't.

Jerking out of one asshole's grasp, I hit the other in his masked face, sad I don't get to see the blood spill.

The dickhead I didn't punch grabs me from behind, his arm locking around my throat. I know better than to flail around, so I let myself go limp.

As darkness creeps over me, all I can think is I hope Tennant doesn't get himself into more trouble than necessary. While at the same time, I'm thankful that Roman has more than one lover to help get him through this...

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

Sitting back in my chair, I run a hand through my hair, grimacing as my fingers snag on the tangles.

I can't remember the last time I left the office over the last twenty or so hours, let alone run a comb through my hair. Not that it matters. No, the only thing that matters is finding the bastards that dared to arrest Tennant and Joel.

Scouring the police and court databases has been my priority, leaving everything else to Leandro. I just finished going over everything I gave him, and am impressed by how far the boy has come in a few short years.

It worries me because his impulse control is shit, and the last thing we need is for him to get into trouble. He's stopped breaking into police databases without my knowledge, but that doesn't really mean much when it comes to Leandro. I wouldn't put it past him to purposefully get caught. Getting Tennant out has been a nightmare on its own, and that's by going through legal means, if Leandro were ever to let his impulses get the best of him... Nightmare is the closest I could come to that situation.

Speaking of my son, I turn to look at him after he tosses a wadded up paper at me.

"The fuck was that for?"

"How else was I supposed to get your attention?"

I scowl at him. "What do you want?"

He huffs. "Thought you'd like to know they're on their way back."

My breath catches even as my heart speeds up. Various emotions like happiness, anger, and relief are all mixed with the utter devastation I've been battling.

I know how the court system works, and I understand that nothing gets done quickly—though Sinclair and his merry band of minions have been working overnight to come up with reasons why it would benefit Tennant and Joel to be let out on bail—yet none of that made it any easier.

When Gerald Bradley kidnapped Tennant as an attempt to lure me out, I knew what Ten meant to me. As much as I love Roman and Jude, and what we've built, none of it matters without Tennant.

I thought I was better. I am better. My anxiety and hangups haven't had such a firm grip on me in a while. Time and the death of that bastard have helped. Of course it'd be something to do with Tennant that gets me to fall back on my bad habits.

“How far out are they?”

“Sinclair said they were leaving the courthouse. Enough time for you to look like a human again. Or do you want Tennant to know you haven't been taking care of yourself?”

I grimace as I push away from my desk, knowing he'll take one good look at me and figure out I've barely left my office, but I can at least pretend I'm put together.

“I'll go shower then. Call if anything happens.”

“You know I will. Now, go.”

I head to the door but stop and look at Leandro. “Thank you. You've done a good job since this all started, I'm proud of you.”

He looks over his shoulder and flares at me, his navy eyes are far too serious for someone so young. “Don't start having emotions now; save it for Ten.”

Huffing a laugh, I leave the office and head upstairs.

The shower did a world of good at helping ease some of the tension, and I stayed under the hot water for longer than normal. I can admit, at least here on my own, that maybe I overdid it.

But I don't know what any of them expected me to do. We're barely getting anywhere in finding the Bosses, the police are breathing down the back of every aspect of the business, and they clearly have bigger balls than any of us have given them credit for.

I'm hanging on by a thread, and Tennant being taken almost snapped it.

Standing in front of the mirror, I run a comb through my too long hair. The dark brown strands fall into my face, and for a moment, I have half a mind to cut it all off. I'm annoyed enough to not care that I hate short hair.

Tossing the comb onto the counter, I set my hands on top of the marble and lean over, dropping my head down and taking slow, measured breaths, trying and failing to get myself under control.

The feelings I've repressed while uselessly sitting in my office as Tennant was fucking arrested bubble up, and I let out a scream through clenched teeth.

I'm shaking with the force of my raging emotions, tears forming at the corner of my eyes, and my throat locks up as a sob builds in my chest.

So focused on the maelstrom inside, I don't notice what's going on around me until strong, familiar arms wrap around me.

“Shhh. It's alright, Tesoro. I got you. We're okay.”

I break.

Turning in his arms, I look into hard, ice blue eyes, seeing in them the same barely-restrained rage that's bubbling in me, and I clutch at him.

“Ten...”

“I got you, Hol,” he says. “They're not taking me from you. Ever.”

Falling into him, I let him hold me close as I cry several days' worth of tears. Safe in the knowledge that he's here , and we'll take those bastards down, together.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

The call with Jude went better than expected, but I'm still on the edge of my seat. Fuck. I hope Tennant is alright. It's killing me to be patient and wait for news. There's something about him... He got under my skin so easily.

A knock on my office door stops my obsession. I breathe a sigh of relief when I call, "Enter."

Unfortunately, my heart sinks when it's Marcus and Ignacio who walk in. I...wasn't prepared. And why the fuck do they look so beaten up?

"Boss," Ignacio says as he takes a seat, staring over my shoulder.

Marcus shakes his head and gives Ignacio a pitying look, but doesn't say anything. It's a hit to my heart, but there's nothing I can do about it. That careful voice... Fuck.

Clearing my throat, I address them. "I had an idea. The cops are focused on us and for whatever fucking reason, they've decided they have a death wish. We need to be smart about how we tackle them. They fell for the blind, thank fuck. However, we have way too many other locations that aren't blinds. We need a way to keep them secure. I asked Lio about bringing in some extra help—outside help."

"You mean the gangs or the cartels?" Ignacio asks flatly. When I nod in confirmation, he doesn't seem thrilled with the idea, but he isn't protesting.

Marcus hums as he considers the proposal before slowly nodding. "I can see it working. It'll cost a pretty penny. Probably both in the short-term and long-term, as I'm sure they'll want to negotiate contracts."

“I know,” I growl. “But it’s the best situation I can think of at the moment. The cops are letting them run wild. It’ll distract them from us, while giving us the extra security we need. If we want to have a Family left for Allesandro to come home to, we have to figure out how to staunch our losses from those LEOs.”

“Who would you like us to contact?” Ignacio still won’t look at me and I curl my hands into fists, pressing my nails hard into my skin to distract myself from the emotional tornado ripping through me.

“That’s the issue. I need some ideas. It’s not my territory, and we can’t just contact everyone. That would be foolish. I want people we can trust. Or at least as close to trustworthy as we can get.”

Ignacio and Marcus exchange a glance, seemingly passing information without a word. I hate it. I want to say something, but I can’t. Not now that I’m acting as Second, and am no longer Ignacio’s lover. I used to have that with him. We used to know each other that well. Fuck .

Clearing his throat, Ignacio directs my thoughts back to the issue. “I would say the Cartel would be a good option. We’ve had issues with them in the past, but they still work with us. Il Padrone was able to smooth the issue over. If they can still work with us after losing men, then I’d say this would likely be a good opportunity. However, they will definitely want to readjust their contract. Perhaps you could ask for that to be short-term?

“I’d also think the gang on the west side would be an option. They are more...civilized. I have a contact there, and we’ve collaborated before on behalf of our Bosses.”

“I concur,” Marcus says. “Those are the only two I’d consider approaching. Lio will need to be the one who reaches out to the Cartel. They won’t handle working with

anyone but the Boss. There is some...concern with doing this. Whoever we approach, there's a risk they'll consider us open to takeover."

"But you think those two will abide by an agreement?" I lean back in my chair, searching Marcus's face. Seeing his grimace, I'm more than a little concerned.

"I believe the gang will likely not take advantage. They don't have the manpower to extend further than their current territory. The Cartel...it's always a risk. So you'd need to be prepared to give them a hell of a concession. If you do that, they'll abide by the agreement," Ignacio says, taking over from Marcus. Both of them clearly understand a background I'm unfamiliar with. What the fuck am I doing as a Second if I can't even handle this?

"Very well. I'll talk to Lio about the Cartel. Ignacio, can you reach out to the gang and feel them out? Don't make any decisions yet, just find out if it's something they'd consider working with us on."

He nods sharply and I excuse them to go do their jobs. Marcus leaves first, but Ignacio stops and stares at me. I tense, worried about what he's doing. I hope to fuck it's nothing personal, but I saw him wearing the engagement ring at breakfast, and I have to fight not to draw my attention to it now.

Coughing, he rolls his shoulders before finally meeting my gaze. It's like staring at a burning man. His eyes have never hidden his feelings when he's with me, yet with one blink, they disappear, and the emotions are locked down. "It's a great idea, Boss. We'll get it taken care of and report in later."

He walks out the door and I can only stare. That acknowledgement... Fuck. It's all I wanted from him. But why did he wait so long? Why did he wait until we were broken?

I slump in my seat, resting for a brief moment before I have to go speak with Lio. Struggling to catch my breath, so many memories rush over me. All those fucking times we were together. The time with Jax when we thought we'd die. And how that should have made us stronger, but didn't. The nightmares we've both endured since then. Fuck .

Part of me wants a hug from him, to seek comfort from it. But I can't claim that anymore. There's nothing left except ashes, and it's my fault. The other part of me is selfish. I want Tennant. I want his hands on me, his voice whispering to me, claiming me, promising to make me a better Second.

Standing up, I head to Lio's office. I force myself to stop thinking about Ignacio and Tennant. We've got shit to do and I can't afford to lose my focus.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

I 'm pacing my office when the door opens. I whirl around, ready to attack whoever enters, and have to quickly rein myself in when I see Benjamin. Huffing, I gesture for him to sit while I head towards my desk chair. I sneer at it before sitting, hating being in this position.

“Alright, let me have it.” I wait patiently for Benjamin to speak, even when it takes him two tries.

Sighing, he leans forward, putting his elbows on my desk. “I spoke to Ignacio and Marcus, who, by the way, both look beat up to hell. They recommend the Cartel or the gang on the west side. They did note that it's probably going to be costly—including contract negotiation.

“Ignacio has a contact with the gang. I've sent him and Marcus there. As for the Cartel, I was told they'd only talk to the Boss. I know there were issues before with them, so...I'll leave that up to you.

“They raised a good point that letting too many people know what's going on could open us up to a takeover attempt. The gang doesn't have the manpower, but the Cartel...”

“If the gang doesn't have enough manpower to take over, that makes me question if they'll have enough to provide the help we need.”

I frown, trying to calculate the odds of whether the Cartel would actually help.

“We can try. Let's move this to Master's office. He has all the contact information. I

know we got into a fucked-up situation before, with Marcus killing the Cartel members. I wasn't here, so I don't remember the exact details. We had to increase a percentage for a year, so there's precedent. The problem is...Marcus killed Ricardo's nephew. So I'm not sure if he'll put any of his men at risk for us."

Benjamin follows me to Master's office and takes the Second's seat while I slide behind Master's desk. "Hmm. With that information, do you think even bringing this to them is a good idea?"

"No. I don't have a fucking clue." I tap my fingers along the desk, glaring at the phone as I question whether the risk is worth it. The number for Ricardo is there, and I can easily record him, but...it's such a fucking risk.

"Well, Jude was going to check into some things on his end. Why don't we wait before going down that route? Find out if the gang can help, and then, if needed, we can look into the Cartel."

Pleased with his plan, I smile at Benjamin. I certainly picked the right person to be my Second. It's a fucking relief. I purse my lips when Benjamin's expression doesn't change. Fuck. I have a feeling I know what this is about.

"I can cut off Ignacio's ring finger," I suggest hopefully. If it'll make Benjamin feel better, I'm more than happy to help. Plus, it won't take Ignacio out long-term. It's win-win.

Snorting, Benjamin shakes his head at me before staring at the Martelli crest. "Do you think... I mean... Fuck. Ignacio is working with me on this. It's fine. I just...don't understand him. He actually said I was doing a good job. What the fuck, right? Where was he all this time?"

With a pained look, I try to figure out what the hell to say. He didn't rule out taking

off the finger, so... “I don’t really know what Ignacio is thinking. Maybe he’s finally figured out that he fucked up. Maybe he wants to make amends. However...we’re all criminals here. We’re all used to getting our own way, by whatever method is needed. Our motto is Loyalty, Courage, Victory. Where has his loyalty been? Do you really feel one night is enough to change him?”

Benjamin doesn’t say anything as he stares at me. The clock ticks by, but the silence is not uncomfortable. It never is with him—even with these fucking feelings. Exhaling, he gives me a weak smile. “And that is why friendship rules dictate you’re not allowed to leave. And Roman can’t have you. Thank you for putting things into perspective, because fuck knows I can’t. I guess the most I can do is wait and see what happens with him. It’s hard enough waiting to see how Tennant is, which is killing me.”

“Ah, yeah. I would think we’d have heard something by now. Let me send a text to the person you are refusing to like—because you’re ridiculous—and see what he says.”

I laugh at my friend’s look of disgust. I don’t understand his issue with Roman, but I let it lie. If he’s going to be with Tennant, he’s going to have to learn to accept Roman.

We both jump when the phone rings. Jesus, I’d only just sent the fucking text. Picking it up, I put it on speakerphone. “Roman, it’s Lio and Benjamin here.”

“Good,” he states in a crisp voice. “I need you here, Lio. I have information from Jude, and I think it would be beneficial for all of us to talk about it in-person.”

I hesitate for a moment, not wanting to leave my territory. When Roman makes an impatient noise, I roll my shoulders back and respond. “We’ll be there. When?”

“Now. We want this wrapped up quickly, as Tennant and Joel are on their way back.”

Benjamin gasps as he stands, already walking out of the door. “Sure, it appears I need to catch up with my Second anyway, since he’s headed there with or without me. Looks like he’s ready to see a certain Amato.”

Roman gives a muted laugh. “That tends to be the case with Tennant. There’s something about him... We’ll see you soon.”

I hang up, and for a moment, I just breathe. Whatever plan Roman and Jude have come up with, I hope it’s solid. And I fucking hope we hear from Ignacio and Marcus soon. I’d rather not go to the Cartel, but I will.

As I leave, I take a moment to question whether I can remove Ignacio’s finger without too much issue. Would that be morale boosting or the opposite?

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

I wonder if anyone would notice if I just killed everyone on our list. It'd solve all our problems.

Instead of giving in to the impulse, though, I'm told I need to be present at a meeting with the Martellis. I don't care about plans, or what we have to do in order to keep the police off our ass. Sinclair probably hopes I'll listen to his warnings to lay low, especially since he had to be very careful to make it seem like I'm not too unstable to be out in the world, but rather, it'd be detrimental to my mental health to be locked away.

A delicate balance, where my previous history is both helpful and a hindrance. Maybe it's time to finally take my kill. After all, that bastard Sergio paid off to have me locked up is retired now, no one will miss him digging around in their heads.

"We can't keep them waiting," Hollis says gently.

I bite back a harsh remark and follow him out of our bedroom, only to stop at the sight of Elias and Benji waiting for us.

"Why aren't you with Roman?" I bark.

Benji ignores my tone and gives me a flat look. "Because he has two other guards who can take a shift. Whereas your only guard was arrested along with you, and is currently hating his life because he has to deal with Doc."

If I had the capacity for anything else, aside from the burning need to take out everyone who had a hand in my brief incarceration, I'd probably feel bad for Joel for

having to put up with Doc's incessant worrying.

As it is, the only thing keeping me somewhat focused at the moment is Hollis's hand on me.

"Let's go, I know there are people who want to see you," he urges gently.

I barely stop myself from sneering. I'm sure my lovers know being around people is the last thing I want right now, but we all still have jobs to do, because they didn't manage to miraculously find Cristian and Il Padrone in the time I was gone.

Hollis leads the way downstairs, his strides sure and confident, and nothing like the broken mess I found in our bathroom less than an hour ago.

If we had time, I'd drag him away and not only put him back to rights—because as much as he acts like he's fine, I know him better than that and can see the tension in every line of his body—but also to give my own tumultuous insides an outlet.

When this shit is over, I'm kidnapping him for two weeks and keeping him to myself. My Tesoro needs the stress relief as much as I do—maybe more.

Hollis barely knocks on Cristian's office door before pushing it open, and it'd be amusing that he's picking up my bad habits if the entire situation we've found ourselves in isn't so distressing.

"Ten!" Roman's sob as soon as I step into the room is my only warning before I end up with an armful of crying boy. I don't hesitate to hold him close, soaking up the feel of him.

Boston, Leandro's German Shepherd, whines and nudges my leg. I look down into her golden brown eyes and shake my head. "I got him. Stand down," I order.

She ignores me and lifts her head, pressing her nose to Roman's leg and letting out a woof . Blindly, he reaches down for her and gives her a pat, repeating my command, only then does she back off a bit.

Despite training her for Leandro's protection, her empathetic nature means she's very in tune to Roman's sometimes volatile emotions. I'd be annoyed with it if she hasn't shown she's capable of doing both jobs. That she's able to bring Roman comfort when he needs it, isn't something I can argue against.

"Don't ever fucking do that to me again," he whispers.

"It wasn't like I planned it, Little Prince."

He squeezes me tighter. "I already lost Dad... I can't lose you, too."

"Cristian isn't dead, or gone forever," I bite back, trying my best not to lose it on him. "He is just...taking a vacation. A rather inconvenient one."

Roman pulls away, his teary green eyes boring into mine. "How can you joke about shit like this? We have zero fucking proof he or Il Padrone are alive. For all we know, the bastard doing this killed them on day one, and is slowly trying to tear us apart."

I release him, letting him slide down my body to his feet, and then firmly push him away, though I keep my hands on him still. "We also have no proof of that. No bodies, no murder. We're keeping to that. If they wanted to hurt us, they would have sent them back in pieces. The radio silence while the police try to take us out is very telling. Don't let your emotions rule you. You're allowed to feel them, but they are not in charge here. Understand?"

His lower lip wobbles, but he sniffs and nods. "Understood."

“Give him a fucking break,” Jude cuts in. “I get you're probably exhausted and pissed, but it hasn't exactly been a picnic here, either. So curb the asshole for a while longer.”

I release Roman and then turn to Jude. “Giving orders now, Little Lamb? Think you're a big, bad Second after a day without me?”

Jude steps right into my space, his pale green eyes are dark with a spark that gets under my skin and ignites the already simmering flame.

“This isn't the time for your shit, Tennant.”

Grabbing him by the throat, I press him into the wall. “I'm sorry to be an inconvenience to you, Agnellino.”

He presses his hands against my chest, but otherwise doesn't fight me, though there's anger in his eyes as they darken and his lip curls into a sneer.

“You want me to be an asset? To be a Second you can be proud of? Then set a better example.”

Digging my fingers into the skin of his neck, I lean in. Rather than saying another word, I let the harsh kiss I plant on his lips speak for me.

Jude doesn't give, his fingers curl into my shirt and his teeth catch on my lip, biting down on the thin flesh until it bleeds.

I don't stop kissing Jude until there's a knock at the office door. Pulling away from him, I remove my knife, holding it loosely in my grasp as Roman calls for whomever it is to enter.

Emilio and a harried-looking Benjamin enter the room. The second Benjamin's eyes meet mine, he takes a step toward me, only to hesitate.

“You're either out or in, Topolino,” I tell him in a bored tone. “I don't have time for this half-ass shit.”

Benjamin raises his chin and walks squarely up to me, his sea green eyes full of determination. What he is determined to get is a mystery to me. Especially since he's now had time to spend with Ignacio, and to think about what he's doing.

“Are you happy to see me, Baby Mouse?”

He exhales sharply and his eyes become glassy with unshed tears. “Yes.”

Grabbing him roughly, one hand in his hair, the other around his waist, I tug him closer. Bending his head back, I trace my gaze down his slender throat to the vivid claiming mark there.

Unable to help myself, I lean down and bite him again. Enjoying the way he moans and arches into me.

The taste of his blood is sweet, and if we didn't have a shitstorm waiting for us, I'd show him just how feral I can be. Because permanently marking this boy sounds better and better the longer he stands in front of me.

Pulling away, I plant one more hard kiss to his beautiful mouth before letting him go, evading his grabbing hands, and moving to take up my customary spot between the door and Cristian—Roman's—desk.

“Is this everyone?” I ask mildly.

“Yes,” Roman replies. “Jude has an idea we need to run by the rest of you before we can implement it. The inclusion of the Martellis is both a courtesy and because Jude made me aware you have your own plans in place.”

Emilio nods as he takes a seat across from Roman—who sits on the desk rather than behind it. “We do.”

Jude moves to stand near Roman and I tilt my head. “No interpreter?”

“I can manage. Everyone aside from Emilio can sign. I don't believe we'll have to worry about things getting out of hand, will we?”

“I think we can have a civilized conversation,” Roman agrees.

I snort but everyone ignores me, though I do get a look from Hollis as he takes a seat in his corner. He makes sure to move the chair to the corner of the desk so he can be seen.

“Why don't you go first, Jude?” Roman turns his attention to him.

“We need help,” Jude says simply. “Even with our combined forces, we're still stretched thin. If Ten and Joel getting arrested was any indication, it's obvious we cannot afford to continue as we are. Not if we want to find Il Padrone and Cristian, and keep the Families running. So, I proposed we reach out to Petrov. He runs the Bratva, and has been our closest ally for as long as I can remember.” He grimaces but says, “My family always used to gripe about that—back when the De Lucas were a separate entity to the Amatos.

“Not only that, we have his nephew. If anything, dealing with the fallout from Soren's father trying to kill Doc showed us how much Ivan cares for Soren—even if he couldn't show it while Nicolai was alive. It was Soren who suggested it, but it's not

a bad idea in my opinion.”

“Nor mine,” Roman says. “I don't want to let others know we're vulnerable, and some of the Russians disagree with us simply because Dad is married to Carter, but I trust Ivan and David. They can be useful in such a way that doesn't directly say anything is wrong here. Moreso, it can be used as a distraction to allow us to move on those we need to; maybe we'll fucking get somewhere, finally.”

Emilio dips his head after a minute of contemplation. “Benjamin suggested something similar. Though you are our only close ally, we have contracts with both a gang to the west of our territory, and the Cartel we do business with.”

Benjamin speaks up. “Marcus and Ignacio agreed with me when I brought the idea to them. Ignacio has a contact in the gang that he's reaching out to. Nothing is set in stone, just a feeler, and Lio was getting ready to make contact with the Cartel when we got your call.”

Roman leans back on his hands. Dressed in a dark-green dress shirt and black pleated skirt with ribbons, and feet clad in low heeled dress boots, legs crossed at the ankles, he looks like an innocent college student rather than a mafia Boss—exactly what he was trained to present as.

A fissure of pride at seeing him use what he was taught breaks through the need to do something, though it's fleeting.

“Ten?” Roman looks to me. “Thoughts?”

I shrug. “I am not acting as Second. I believe the idea has merit—at least as far as the Russians go—but it is not my decision, is it?”

“Don't do that,” Hollis snaps, impatience in his tone. “Your opinion is valued because

you have the most experience here. You know how these things work. Do not let your anger and your need for revenge get the better of you. Work with us and we will take them down together.”

I show my teeth, though I doubt the look can be anything close to a smile. “I’d rather burn them all to the ground and be done with it.”

“And when you're taken into custody without bail? Where will that leave us?” Jude asks coldly.

“I hope you would be breaking me out, Agnellino.”

“More like leave you there to rot with your piss-poor attitude.”

“Enough.” Roman sits up and glares at me. “I need you with me, Ten. Can I still trust you?”

“I’ll do my job, and will leave a bloody trail in my wake, but yes, you have my support, and can count on me.”

He doesn't look like he believes me, but, same as his father, decides to let me stay anyway. One day that decision will get him or Cristian killed.

“Good. Now, if it were you, what would you do?”

“Contact Petrov. I wouldn't suggest spelling out our problem, but I'm sure he'll come to his own conclusions since it's you asking and not Cris.

“The gang is a good idea as well. I wouldn't trust the Cartel with a ten-foot pole; that'd be like telling Oliveria and his Boss of our situation, and the Brazilians wouldn't hesitate to capitalize on it. However, that is not my call. Only you are aware

of that situation and what is best for your Family, Emilio.”

A small, respectful look crosses both his and Benjamin's faces, as if they're happy I'm acknowledging they are capable of their own decisions.

That's one chip too many in my crumbling walls. I don't believe I've been that much of an asshole—just about Benjamin's poor education and training.

“Are we done here?”

Roman hesitates before finally nodding. “We can continue without you; if I need your input, you'll answer your phone?”

“Of course.”

“Then go, but don't do anything rash, please. We just got you back.”

“I'll think about it.”

Roman sighs and Hollis starts to protest but... I'm done. So utterly fucking done.

Without looking back, I leave the office.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

I barely give it a second before I'm up and out of my seat. I glance at Lio and he waves me off. After taking a quick peek at Hollis, who also gives me permission, I'm off, working to catch up with Tennant. I follow him, but he doesn't give any impression of knowing I'm trailing after him.

He enters a training room before whirling around and grabbing me by the neck, growling out, "Are you following me, Topolino? That's a dangerous move for a little mouse like you. You let me lead you right where I wanted."

"You left too soon for me," I whisper as I step forward into his space.

"I don't have time to play with you," Tennant snarls as I step in front of him. The fire in his icy eyes is now a raging inferno, one that will burn us all down.

"You think I'll let you just walk out that door? Fuck that." I meet his anger with my own.

After what he's just been through, fuck if I'll let him be rash and get thrown back in jail. Not when we—I—need him so much.

"You don't know what you're asking for." Tennant glares down at me and my skin crawls, but I refuse to cede any space.

Gathering up my courage, I take one step closer and whisper, "Then show me."

Baring his teeth, he takes it as the challenge it is. I'm not sure where the knife came from, but it's now sliding against my skin. I gasp as the tip rips through my shirt.

He's not being careful and I fucking love it, even as blood swells up in several places.

Pushing the tattered shirt off, he studies me, and I've never felt more like a little mouse, caught in a predator's sight.

"Undress all the way. You won't like what I do with my knife if you don't." His harsh voice makes me jump, and I scramble to obey.

As I do, he pulls his shirt over his head, and thank fuck I manage to finish undressing when he does, because all of that skin on display for me...

I step forward, intent on touching his hard muscles and the skin that's laid bare in front of me. It's not unblemished. No, it tells a story. One I want to trace with my tongue. "Fuck, you're so beautiful."

Before I can connect with his body, he grabs my hand, squeezing it tightly. I gasp from the pain, but the expression on his face doesn't change. He places the knife to my throat before tossing it aside. Grabbing my shoulders, he flips me down onto my stomach. I let out an oomph, but that's all the breath I have before he drops his entire weight onto my back.

"I think, Topolino, that you've forgotten your manners. You don't touch without permission. And right now, you don't have any." His dark laugh sends chills up my spine, but I can't say a damn thing.

He finally moves off my back, but I stay in this position, not wanting to risk him walking away. That's my deepest fear right now. I need him to use me, to help him let go of all that pain and fury.

Humming, he grabs my ass cheeks and squeezes, digging his fingernails in. I gasp, but when he suddenly lets go, I'm bereft from his touch. It only lasts a moment

because, all of a sudden, two strong fingers enter me. Without any lube, it's like I'm on fire, and I screech, trying to move forward as tears obscure my vision. "Fuck!"

"Does it hurt, Topolino? It better. You need to learn your place."

I choke on a breath when he removes his fingers and presses his cock against my hole. With one harsh thrust, he's inside me, despite my ass not being ready. The pain envelops me, choking me, and my muscles quiver from the exertion. He grabs my hair and yanks my head back until he's whispering in my ear. "Breathe, Topolino. You need to relax because I'm not going to stop until I'm finished with you."

"Damnit," I choke out, trying to relax.

There's no finesse this time. It's a punishment—his or mine, I'm not sure. My body isn't designed to take this level of retribution, but I bite my tongue against any complaints. The dark fury I've felt from him since he walked into the office seems to roll over me, even if I can't see his eyes.

He pulls out quickly and another involuntary scream erupts from me. Sharp teeth bite into the back of my neck, stilling me. I gulp from the sensation, and wait until he decides what to do next. I'm nothing more than a marionette, and he controls my every movement.

When he finally flips me over onto my back, it's almost a relief. At least now I can see him. The rage isn't banked completely, but it's down to a simmer, and that's all I need to know. He doesn't say a word as he enters me again. There's no need. He knows he owns me, and that I would never disagree.

He grabs one leg and puts it over his shoulder, allowing him to go deeper. There's no pleasure for me. Whether it's deliberate or not, he's not hitting my prostate. Instead, he's letting me feel his desire only.

Our ragged breaths mix, and when he throws his head back, I'm in awe, even as sweat clings to my body from the exertion. He's a fucking wolf . Nothing will stop him.

As his thrusts become more erratic, he reaches out and squeezes my throat. He doesn't start light, and instead jumps straight to pain. He dips his head next to mine, snarling, "You think you can control me? That you'll put your ass on the line and I'll just fall for it? Never."

When he finally pulls his head back, my air is being cut off completely, and I know how this is going to end, but I don't fucking care. If he needs this, then so be it. They say there's no greater honor than to sacrifice your life for something you believe in... I believe in Tennant, and I'll leave this world at peace if it helps him.

As he stutters to a stop, the black spots begin to overwhelm me. I can't speak as I have no air, so I carefully mouth the words "I love you", and with a smile, I drop into the darkness, ready for whatever comes after this life...

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

I've never had a book make me hungry before. As I wonder if I can con Daddy into giving me another snack, my current patient stirs, making a small groan that turns into a louder, more painful one as the noises hurt his bruised throat.

Rolling my eyes, I mark my page and close the book, setting it aside as I push away from my desk.

Soren is already at Benjamin's bedside, urging him to lay still and keep quiet while I wash and glove up. I watch as Soren carefully allows Benjamin a few sips of water before sidling up to the bed.

"I didn't expect to see another Martelli in my medical room, but I suppose that was wishful thinking," I tell him. "You're lucky Tennant knows how to control himself."

Benjamin scowls and says hoarsely, "I think we have different definitions of control."

I hum as I gently tilt his head back and begin palpating his throat. "I've known him a long time, not killing you is holding back, trust me. Please let me know if something hurts too much."

Feeling along his swollen and bruised throat, I don't find anything amiss, at least nothing more than you'd expect after having the life choked out of you.

"Do you know what day it is?"

"Yes," he snarks in a weak voice. "I also know the president and my full name. Oh, and that my best friend isn't in here, so you should probably worry that he's plotting

your demise.”

I snort. “He can try.” I look into his eyes, pleased to see normal pupil dilation, which is a big change from when he was brought in hours earlier. “I allowed him to sit with you for a bit, but he got on my nerves too much, so I had him escorted out.”

The little mafia Boss doesn’t scare me, not when the big ones don’t either. After kindly reminding Emilio that I held his best friend’s comfort and health in my hands, he finally saw things my way—after James locked him out of the room.

The expression on Benjamin’s face says he’s worried for my health, but I don’t pay it any mind. I would like to see Emilio try something; it’d be very entertaining.

“Moving on,” I say cheerfully. “You’re lucky Tennant didn’t kill you, though I’m sure you’re aware of that.”

“Doc...” Soren says in that voice—the one that promises there will be consequences, and not the fun kind.

I ignore him and continue giving Benjamin his prognosis. “Your throat is swollen, and probably will be for the next few days. I’d estimate it’ll get better in about a week, but don’t be surprised if it’s sore for a while. There’s no damage to the inside of your throat, thankfully—ask Hollis how much of a bitch torn vocal cords are to heal.

“Your asshole is swollen, but you must be the luckiest bastard in the world, as aside from being inflamed, you escaped any anal fissures. I’d still suggest taking it easy, lots of fluids and fiber to help with softer bowel movements. I’d recommend avoiding sex for a few days, ideally a week, but I know how you fuckers operate. So if you are going to have sex, either you top, or tell your partner to go easy. Because stitches inside your ass are a pain—literally.”

Neither Benjamin nor Soren seem to appreciate my sense of humor. Benjamin scowls while Soren groans and mutters under his breath in a weird mixture of Russian and Italian.

“Any questions?”

“When can Lio come back in?”

I huff and roll my eyes. “I meant medical questions, but if you don't have any then there's no reason he can't sit with you. I want you to try to rest a little longer before you go home—or are you staying here with Ten?” I don't bother waiting for his reply. “Doesn't matter. I already have a meeting scheduled with Dr. Ranlen to go over some medical history for all of you. That way we're both prepared should any of you end up in either of our care again.”

“Isn't medical history private?” he asks, frowning.

I give Benjamin a blank stare. “Nothing in this Family is private, especially medical stuff. We won't be discussing details, but I need to know how to treat you assholes, and vice versa. Anyway, I'll go get your friend if there's nothing else you need? I only kicked him out because he was getting on my nerves and I'm not one you want to disrespect.” I give him my best smile. “After all, I have the good drugs.”

Benjamin huffs and mutters, “Your funeral,” under his breath.

Instead of responding to that, I say, “I'm actually impressed. I didn't think anyone, aside from Hollis and Cristian, could go up against Tennant and live. You might have a death wish, but I kinda like your spirit.”

“Enough, Doc,” Soren says. “How about we give him space, since we've pretty much done all we can.”

I shrug. “Fine, go open the door and let the feral one in.” I nod towards the water cup on the table next to the bed. “Small sips, you don’t want to aggravate your throat. We gave you painkillers, but if you’re too uncomfortable, let someone know and we’ll give you more.”

He nods and winces as the motion of moving his neck hurts. “Thank you.”

“Sure. Anytime. It’s what I’m paid for.”

There’s a commotion at the door as Soren opens it and Emilio barges his way in. I move away from the bed, removing my gloves as I go.

“We’ll be around, and someone will be posted outside the door, so don’t hesitate to call us if you need anything,” I tell them, though both boys ignore me, focusing only on each other.

Tossing my gloves, I don’t bother to wash my hands—there are plenty of bathrooms I can use quickly. I have a feeling it’s best to get out of the way for now.

Soren ushers me out of the office and closes the door behind him. In the hall, I look at James. “I need food, so we’ll be in the kitchen if you need us.”

My best friend nods. “Don’t worry, I’ll keep an ear out.”

“Thanks.”

Looping my arm through my Daddy’s, I begin walking down the hall, but as we turn the corner, I say, “Shit, I forgot my book.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

“What the fuck were you thinking?” I snarl at my best friend. “When I gave you permission to join him, I certainly didn’t figure you’d give your fucking life!”

“Calm down, Lio.” Benjamin’s voice is hoarse, which only pisses me off more. “It was my choice. He needed to get his anger out. Just like you, he works better when he’s calm. And I love him enough to give him that!”

“Love,” I scoff, pacing around the doctor’s room, but not taking anything in. “You thought you loved Ignacio until recently. You still have unresolved feelings there. Now you’re telling me you’re so much in love with that Amato that you’re happy to skip to your death? And fucking leave me!”

Benjamin flushes, whether in embarrassment or shame, I have no idea. To be honest, I don’t give a fuck. He’s supposed to be my goddamn Second. Instead, he just goes off thinking it’s a good idea to die?

“You know it’s not that easy. And it’s impossible to control feelings. If it was, you wouldn’t have fallen for Allesandro after everything he did.” Benjamin clutches the sheet and tries to move, but I skewer him with a glare that stops him.

“You cannot compare what Master did to that fucking psycho. Not once did he put my life at risk. Not once did he strangle me to the point I may not live. You. Fucking. Played. With. Your. Life.” I move towards him, scowling, as I feel like I’m about to vibrate out of my skin. “Where are your friendship rules? Where is the promise you made me after we got you back from Jax? I promised you forever, and you promised me it as well! Am I no longer important enough?”

Benjamin goes white at the reminder, and while I feel a flash of satisfaction, I hate that it's come to this. Fucking Amatos. I thought I could trust them. Fuck . This goes too far.

I want to raze it all to the ground. One match to destroy their world. I can find Il Padrone on my own. They aren't allies. They're fucking enemies .

“Lio...I still love you, too. This just happened. I know you're hurt, but I am still here. I'll always be here.”

I snort in disbelief and hold the water to him when his voice almost gives out. Despite my anger, I still love the fucking asshole. Why? I have no fucking clue.

“You don't love me. Even though I love you. Your friendship rules. The way we had each other's back. But you walked away, and I won't forget it. Ever.”

I put the water back and whirl around, unable to even look at my friend. Maybe ex-friend . Fuck, I don't know. He's the one who has always helped with my emotions, and now he's betrayed everything we had. Ripping out my heart like it's nothing.

“I can't make you believe it, but I'll show you.”

“You'll fucking show me?! You did! You showed me that you'd rather die than be my friend. Than be my Second. Than help me find Master. Than...” I choke on my words as I turn around. My hands are shaking and I stumble back, unable to get anything else out.

Destruction. That's what I need. I need payment...in fucking blood.

The door bursts open and I have my fucking chance as Tennant rushes in, glaring at me. I don't bother to think, the knife is in my hand and flying out of it quicker than I

can even process. Tennant growls as he ducks, but it still manages to lodge itself in his shoulder.

I smile, grabbing another knife, because he didn't even slow down. There's not a sound of pain, and there needs to be one. It turns out blood payment wasn't enough...

Tennant grabs the knife out of my hand, tossing it aside as Benjamin tries to shout. I have no fucking clue what he's saying, but hell, it better not be him begging for this fucker's life.

I push against Tennant, who is immovable. His hands grab my wrists, as if he's actively trying not to hurt me. Fucker doesn't have the decency to deal with me one-on-one.

"You need to calm down. You're bothering my Topolino. I will not stand for you yelling at him."

Hissing at him when he squeezes my wrists more, I go to hook my leg between us when another voice descends. It freezes me immediately. "Lio! You will stop—right this minute. This is not becoming of a Boss."

Cringing, I stare around Tennant at Keegan. Fuck . Now I know I'm in major trouble. I pull away from Tennant as I switch my attention to Keegan. I would have thought, after being involved in Ignacio's punishment, he'd back away. Instead, he's coming right at me. That fucking disappointed look is too similar to Il Padrone's.

"You have no idea what's going on," I respond, proud of myself for keeping my voice level.

"Oh no. I heard what happened. That's why I came." He darts a glance toward Tennant. "I agree, you have every right to be pissed. But this isn't the way to go

about it. You know if you kill any Amato, we're going to be fighting more than one war, not to mention I'm not ready for Sarah to come down on us all. It's a bad idea."

I blink rapidly, the threat of Dr. Ranlen only partially invading my thoughts. Fuck . I really want to kill these motherfuckers. Keegan's calm voice irks me, but I'm beginning to accept that I can't just kill them all. Although I reserve the right to kill Tennant when the time comes.

"Fine," I say curtly. "Let's get Benjamin and go home."

"I think—" Benjamin starts, but on seeing my cutting glare, he shuts up. Which is a good fucking idea right now.

Keegan helps him up, and manages to bundle us all together, shielding us so that we're not at risk of any repercussions from my actions. Like the whole "make Tennant bleed" thing. Granted, the fucker just smiled at me, even after I stabbed him.

I don't say a word to any of the Amatos as we leave, even though Roman tries to talk to me. I just want to go home. And I fucking want my Master. I desperately need him to be here, to put me on my knees and take this pain away.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

“Well, you’ll live,” Doc says after bandaging the wound on my shoulder.

“You don’t have to sound so sad about that, Doc,” I tell him.

“Tennant,” Hollis admonishes.

Doc laughs at the idea of me being in trouble, and it takes all of my frayed control to not shoot the bastard. Thankfully, he’s finally finished cleaning me up, and begins his wound care spiel, which I can tune out since I know the drill already.

“Am I going to be kicked out of my office again?” Doc asks when he’s finally finished.

“For a few minutes,” Hollis replies. “We need to have a talk.”

Doc grumbles, but Soren begins to lead him out the door. “Take as long as you need,” the younger man says.

“Wait! My book!” Doc goes over to his desk and picks up a paperback, before leaving me alone with Hollis, Roman, and Jude.

As soon as the door is closed, Hollis turns to me. His dark eyes are hard and there's an edge to his voice I haven't heard before. “What happened?”

Shit. Maybe Doc should have stayed, this isn't going to be pretty.

I don't look away from his dark gaze, knowing if I give even an inch, he'll give me a

matching wound. “I was slipping. You and I both know my control is shit without Cristian. Being arrested, having those bastards act as if they’re better than me...it pushed me too far off the ledge. Benjamin saw that and took matters into his own hands.”

“You almost killed him,” Roman bursts out, jumping from the chair he’s sitting in. Jude tries to reach for him, but he evades his hands. “No.” He looks at Jude, then to Hollis, before glaring at me. “You may have just fucked up any partnership we could have had with the Martellis. They were becoming more than just our allies. Lio and I are friends, for fuck’s sake. And you ruined it, all because you can’t fucking help yourself!”

“Roman!” Hollis reprimands. “That’s enough.”

“Let him get it out, Tesoro. The boy has something to say, so he should say it.”

Tears fall down Roman’s cheeks. “Damn right I have things to say! You fucked up! We were getting somewhere in our partnership, because we were all on the same page, and we’re far stronger together, but you had to ruin it. For once, I felt like I had a handle on this leadership thing, but if I can’t even keep my own partner in line, what good am I? We’ll be lucky if they ever talk to us again.”

“He loves him,” Hollis cuts in. His voice is still level, but there’s a hardness to it that speaks with such conviction it makes all of us look at him.

“You’re saying Tennant almost killed Emilio Martelli’s Second because he loves him.” The disbelief in Jude’s voice is warranted.

Hollis shrugs. “Yes.” The seriousness in his gaze when he meets my eyes takes my breath away, and makes me glad I’m already sitting down. “He almost killed me to show me my place in his life. He uses Roman for his pleasure to do the same thing,

and he allows you to challenge him with only a sore ass or mouth as a repercussion,” Hollis explains. “Benjamin seems to be the perfect mix of all of us. When I gave Benjamin to you, I expected you to have your fun. I didn’t expect you to want to keep him, but I’m adaptable. After all, you don’t ask me for things. I was happy to let you have a boyfriend because I knew where you belonged. Now...”

Hollis moves over to me and tilts my head back, forcing me to show my throat. “You love hard, Ten. Even if you don’t know it, because love is one emotion you refuse to get an understanding of.”

I scowl. “It’s stupid brain chemistry.”

Hollis gives me an indulgent smile. “Maybe. But it also allowed you to fall for the last person you were supposed to.” He leans down, his lips a hair’s breadth from mine as he says, “It’s beautiful watching you be with someone who can bring you to your knees.”

I’d protest...except we both know he’s right. Feelings don’t mean much to me, or make much sense unless I allow them to. Love means even less. I know where I stand with the three men in this room, and I thought I knew what was going on with Benjamin. It was only supposed to be some fun while I trained him. And then...

“He has so much to give. I admire his loyalty to Emilio, even more that he was willing to throw it all away for me—knowing how much of a sacrifice that was for him. He’s a great student, which only makes me want to teach Chaos a lesson even more, because how dare he leave him floundering for so long. And...” I take a breath and look straight into those dark eyes that have ensnared me from the very beginning. “He reminds me of you, Tesoro.”

Hollis raises an eyebrow, though his impassive expression never changes. “Me?”

“He’s been hurt, brutally. But he didn’t give up, and still hasn’t. He’s pushed himself to be better: for his Family, his best friend, himself. He’s let me tear him down and build him up, and there’s so much potential in him. I want to help him redirect the pain he’s in. I can see it, that concealed rage and need to be better, to want to take on anything and everyone, because like hell will someone touch him again.

“I’m not sure if he’s aware of it, though. If he knows how much of a stranglehold what happened with Jax still has on him. You’re not so different, Hol. You had longer to process and deal with what happened to you, and the way those feelings manifested in you are very different to how they’re manifesting in Benjamin, but I see it, and I want to help.”

The same way I was able to give myself over to Hollis, and be what he needed when he was dealing with the shit that bastard Bradley did to him, I want to be the same for Benjamin.

Hollis’s expression softens a fraction and he gentles his touch, threading his fingers through my hair before leaning in to kiss me. “You’re a good man, Ten.” I scoff but he ignores me. “You are . Thoughtful and caring, and we are so lucky to have you. So is Benjamin, even if his best friend doesn’t think so.”

“He was protecting Benjamin from me. Emilio was angry, yes, but I saw his face, he was hurt. I don’t know what was said before the yelling and stabbing happened, but he was more hurt than pissed at Benjamin’s condition. At least until he got his knife in me,” I say wryly.

Hollis huffs but releases me, before backing up and grabbing Roman, who is still glaring at me. The boy lets Hollis pull him close, and though he doesn’t relax, he does accept the comfort our lover brings.

“He was protecting Benjamin,” I say again. “I would have done the same thing. Hell,

I came in here because I wanted to protect him.”

“Probably best not to tell Lio that,” Roman says. “He’ll just love knowing you think Benjamin needs protecting from him.” He frowns and then adds, “Or do. I’d love to see what he does to you next.”

“Enough,” Hollis says.

I shake my head. “It’s fine, Hol. I understand that he’s pissed. He’s right when he says that the parameters of our relationship with the Martellis have changed now, though that happened long before today.” I gesture to Hollis and then myself. “We’ve both developed deeper relationships with one of the Martellis, the lines have been blurred since the beginning. I just... I’ve found myself caring for Benjamin, more than I thought I would. He brings out a different side of me, one I didn’t realize I had—or needed.”

Hollis was right, Benjamin is the perfect mix of all three of my lovers. He is also very much uniquely him, giving and taking things I didn’t know I needed or had to offer. It’s more than just him being forbidden fruit, too. His position with the Martellis shows he has what it takes to live in this world, and his previous relationship means he’s not afraid of people like me. He is willing to give me his all, simply because he wants me to be the best version of myself.

His “I love you,” may have been unspoken, but I read the words on his lips, and saw the truth in his eyes as he went under. It’s what saved his life. Because who else, aside from four vastly distinctive men, would willingly love a monster?

“So what are we going to do?” Jude asks. “Lines being blurred and loose is one thing, but Roman is right, you’ve changed the game now.”

“First, I’m going to punish the puppy for touching what’s mine,” Hollis says darkly.

Roman turns in his arms. “Because that’ll help the situation.”

Hollis looks down at the boy, his expression unchanging, though I can see his muscles flex as he holds Roman tighter. “Emilio was out of line for touching Tennant. I don’t care if he thought he was doing the right thing, or if he was too out of his mind to really think of the consequences of his actions—that’s worse, actually. Tennant being unstable is one thing, we can handle it, especially since it seems Benjamin helped put things to rights, but we do not need another loose cannon. Especially if Emilio is unwilling to let me help him temper that fire.”

I nod. “I would still like to burn the police station to the ground, but the actual impulse is now a low simmer rather than a burning need we have to be wary of.”

“Emilio needs to be put in his place. He’s going to be suffering without Il Padrone, and while it’s not the same, we’ve been building a relationship that will hopefully help him. I won’t touch him until he’s calmer, as I know nothing will help until then. I am not his Master, so his state of mind matters; lest we make it worse. But he will be punished. There are consequences for touching what’s mine, and he should know that.”

“He could cut ties with us,” Jude points out. “If he believes Benjamin is in danger.”

I shake my head. “He wants Benjamin to be happy and fulfilled. Taking him away from what makes him so—especially after the heartbreak he just endured—would be contradictory to that. If Emilio wants to challenge me, in order to allow Benjamin and I to continue seeing each other, I welcome it.”

I need a challenge, and the Martelli Boss would be an excellent one. When he’s not too pissed off or emotional to see sense. I held myself back from hurting him because I knew he wasn’t in the right state of mind, and the last thing Benjamin needed was for me to hurt his best friend...but if he wants to have a go at it when he has all his

wits about him... I won't have to be asked twice.

"You really think Benjamin will want to continue after you almost killed him?" Roman asks.

I raise a brow and look to the arms currently holding him close. He huffs and rolls his eyes before grumbling, "Fair point. He's as crazy as Hollis is, which is surprising, but I respect him a little more for it." He glares at me. "But if this fucks up my friendship with Lio, I'm going to be pissed."

"Give him time, Tesoro Mio," Jude tells him. "He just experienced his personal nightmare. Let him and Benjamin settle again before reaching out."

Roman looks at me with eyes full of tears, even as he nods at Jude's words. "I hope so. We've been so busy, and drowning in our own shit, we haven't really talked, and this, well... I don't have any other friends, apart from Leandro. I need him."

Sliding off the bed, I take Roman from Hollis. "You'll have him," I reassure. "Just let him stew in his emotions for a moment. Imagine it was one of us in the situation, how would you feel?"

Roman shudders in my arms before finally nodding. "I know you're right. I just... Everything is already so fucked up, I can't lose him, too."

I lean down to kiss him. "You won't."

Roman clings to me, and I glance at Hollis, the look in his eyes tells me he also hopes I didn't just lie to the boy.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

Fuck . When I received the call that Benjamin almost died at Tennant's hands, I was not expecting to walk in on Lio going crazy. I suppose I should have. After all, Benjamin has been claimed by Lio—and I thought, vice versa.

The two of them are sitting in the limo, silent. Lio refuses to look at Benjamin, who appears to be trying to find a way to reach out to his best friend. Good luck to him on that. Offering yourself up to a psychopath? Yeah, that's not going to go down well in Lio's books. And I do not want to know how Ignacio will handle this.

To be honest, I feel for Ignacio. I know how much he loves Benjamin. Did he fuck up? Yeah. But that doesn't turn his love off. He thought he was doing the right thing, and fuck knows, I'm not sure how I would have reacted if Marcus had been the one kidnapped and tortured. It's bad enough with how Marcus's daughter died. He still wakes up in the middle of the night, needing reassurance.

When the limo rolls to a stop, I get out first, before almost dragging the other two out with me. I barely acknowledge the guards as I push the two troublemakers into the house.

Fuck , Cole's teenage years are going to be easy compared to this. This is giving me experience as a father. At least that's what it feels like with these two.

Lio tries to pull out of my grip, but I refuse to let him. Thankfully, none of the other Boys are around at this hour. "Nope. We're going to the study. You will both be talking this shit out. We cannot afford to be divided when we're under attack."

"Fuck," Lio mutters, but stops trying to get away. Instead, he walks with his head

held high, pretending this isn't a problem. Considering what I walked in on, I call bullshit.

Benjamin doesn't say a word, which could be because his throat is hurting. I'll need to call for ice chips. Sighing, I push them into the study and make the call for those and some coffee for Lio. Maybe that'll help him.

The oppressive silence continues, and thankfully, the maid shows up quickly with what I requested. Thrusting the respective cups into their hands, I sigh.

"Will the both of you sit the fuck down? You're both acting like children. I already have one child, I do not need two more. Especially when you're supposed to be our Boss and Second. We just lost all of the dignity we had in front of the Amatos."

They shuffle into opposite seats and I'm ready to lock them in here and throw away the key. Benjamin speaks up and decides to make things so much worse. "We did not. If anything, I made our relationship with them stronger."

Lio scoffs, and I pinch the bridge of my nose because, fucking really? "Benjamin, despite your...whatever it is you have going on with Tennant, our Boss just stabbed one of the Amatos. This is not conducive to an effective truce, much less allies."

"Hell, it would have been even worse if he let himself get killed. Oh wait, he tried to do that." Lio's quick rejoinder causes Benjamin to blanch, but he doesn't look at his friend.

Growling, I pace the room. I don't even know where to start with these two. I'd call for backup, but I don't have a clue who could help me on this. "Alright. This is what we're going to do. You are going to take turns listening to each other. I want you to actually look at each other when you're speaking. There will be no miscommunications under my watch."

“Why?” they say in stereo, and I’d laugh if it wasn’t so serious.

“If you cannot play nice, then Benjamin, you need to step down as Second, and have someone else take your place. We cannot have the two of you fighting when we’ve got serious shit going down.”

Both of them let out a wounded cry, and I breathe easier. It’s a matter of hurt hearts at this point. Neither of them really want to be away from the other, which is a fucking relief. This can be fixed, if they’re only hurt. It’s indifference that can’t be.

“Now, wait just a moment. I picked Benjamin as my Second for a reason. I just... Why would he try to die? Does he not love me anymore?” Lio’s pout is ridiculous, and I struggle not to roll my eyes.

“Alright, that’s an appropriate question. But, it should not be addressed to me. Talk to your friend. And don’t give me any bullshit about this breaking your friendship. Shit happens. People fuck up. You’re still friends. Now, I’m going to trust that you won’t kill each other and I’ll step out. You both need to actually talk, which means, Lio, you cannot stab him, and Benjamin, you need to stop making shitty comments.”

With that, I stride out, closing the door behind me. I slump against the wall, exhausted from them both, but not able to leave yet. I can’t have our Boss killing our Second. Or hell, with the way Tennant has trained Benjamin, the other way around.

Growling under my breath, I realize I need to figure out the Ignacio situation as well. Once he sees the bruises on Benjamin’s neck, all hell will break loose. I don’t think a sparring match with Marcus is going to help with this one. I know if it was the love of my life, it wouldn’t.

Fucking Tennant. Fucking Amatos. And fucking Benjamin. I thought the Martellis took sex to a whole other level, but nope. I now have to contend with another Family

that somehow is more fucked up with it than this one.

I do not deserve this. Those two better get their shit together. Fuck knows I don't need to be the one shuffling Benjamin off his position when both of them claim they want him there. I'll do it, but Marcus will kill me if Lio stabs me...

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

When Keegan leaves, the quiet rushes back. It's unbearably stifling. I'm not sure what to do, or how to reach my best friend. How do I express to him that I still love him? That I didn't mean to hurt him? Fuck. The consequences of my actions...

Clearing my throat, I jump into it. "Lio, I am extremely sorry I hurt you. I do love you, very much. With everything we've been through, there's nobody else I'd rather have at my back, as a best friend."

A small snuffle echoes in the quiet, and my heart breaks. Getting up, I walk over to Lio and sit next to him. I draw him into a hug, refusing to let go when he fights it. Lio doesn't cry. Yet, I did this—and I have no idea how to fix it.

"Why? Why did you...?" Lio's voice is as rough as mine, despite me being the one wearing the bruises. Then again, bruises of the heart may be invisible, but they hurt just as much.

Sighing, I try to think of a way to explain this. I don't even understand it fully myself. "Fuck. I'll try to explain, but...some of this can't be. Remember when you came back from being kidnapped by Peter? And things were really fucked up?"

He finally glances at me, gritting out, "Your point?"

"You went through hell, and had a hard time bouncing back—understandably. But it was to the point where Allesandro had to help you through, uh...unconventional means. You obviously didn't skip off into the sunset with all happiness, sparkles, and rainbows, but you started to work through things."

Lio doesn't say anything, but I can tell he's at least listening, so I carry on. "Now, when I was captured and tortured by Jax...you were there for me. You've always been there for me. However, that doesn't mean the nightmares stopped. Or the anxiety."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Lio leans into me finally and I breathe out a sigh of relief.

"Because I didn't want to admit it. Especially with Ignacio acting so weird around me. Anything I did that seemed dangerous, he stepped in as if I couldn't handle it. I was worried you'd be the same. Until you made me your Second."

"Fucker," he growls. "You should know better. We talked about you being my Second. That never changed. I've always believed in you."

Snorting, I snuggle closer to him. "My own fiancé didn't seem to trust me."

"But I've always been better than him! You know that! Why have friendship rules if you're not going to use them!" He pushes me away, but I roll my eyes at him.

"Friendship rules exist, but romantic relationships happen. It doesn't necessarily mean that they're more important...just different. Remember when we first met? It was because you stepped in front of a bullet for Allesandro. This was much the same."

"How was this the same?" Lio's voice is deadly, and I know I'm facing an uphill battle on this. He's not going to be inclined to accept the truth.

"Tennant was devolving. He was going to do something reckless, dangerous. I could tell with one look that he wasn't holding it together. So yes, I offered to let him channel that emotional storm through me." I pause, trying to come up with words when there aren't any. "He believed in me. That... It was unimaginable after

everything. The fact that he wanted to train me to be better? It was more than I ever expected to get from him. So yes, I fell for him, and when I saw him hurting, I wanted to fix it. Did I suspect he'd try to kill me? Not really. I knew he was dangerous, but I needed him to calm down enough to still be effective. The rage burning through him... Fuck, if you could see it the way I did? There was no question of jumping in front of it."

Lio stiffens and shakes his head. "I don't care if he was going to burn the world and himself down. You put yourself at risk. And I will never accept that—or those fucking Amatos. We will get this taken care of and then they're gone."

"Lio, that's not how it works. I have feelings for Tennant. You'll need to accept that. And you're friends with Roman. Plus, whatever the fuck you have going on with Hollis."

Lio stands up and faces me. His expression is blank, and I know that I've lost him. "No. You're mine. I regret letting you get close to that fucking psychopath. As for Roman and Hollis? I don't give a shit. I'm done. They don't exist to me anymore. You want friendship rules? Well, here's mine. You don't put some asshole above your best friend."

Fear floods my system, and I don't know what to do. He's my best friend, but Tennant... Tennant has come to mean so much to me. He's the balm to my heart, the monster that crushes the ones in my head, and the strength I need to walk forward.

Lio... Lio has always been there for me. He's the one who held me while I tried to pull myself together, the one who hasn't let me down. At least, until now. What he's asking of me... I may as well be cut to pieces, my soul tattered, and my heart ripped from me. How do I choose between the two people I love so deeply?

We stay in silence, his harsh breathing filling the room, when suddenly, Keegan

bursts through the door. Both of us jump at the interruption to our stalemate. He glances between us and scowls when it's clear the tension hasn't abated. Throwing up his hands, he turns to Lio.

"You need to get to the fucking door. Cops are here. They've got a search warrant."

"Shit. We knew this could happen. Call Jenna. I want her here to make sure they don't

do anything they shouldn't," Lio says to Keegan, running his hand through his hair. Shifting his attention to me, he sneers with a coldness I've never had directed at me. "Make yourself useful, contact Hollis. He said something about a kill-switch for Leandro, in case this happened. You've already tried to give your life to them, the least they can do is help us."

Lio strolls out and I stare at him, my mouth hanging open in disbelief. Keegan sighs deeply. "You couldn't come to a truce? Not even for the good of the Family?"

"I thought we were..." I stare at Lio's back in shock. "Until I told him he needed to accept Tennant."

Keegan growls at me, stepping into my space. "You fucking idiot. You could have worked on that later. You know Lio is reactive right now. His Master is gone, and whatever the fuck he had going on with Hollis is now not an option."

"But—"

Keegan cuts me off as his phone rings. "What the fuck do you mean?!" he shouts into the phone.

He barely looks at me as he starts to pace, murmuring words I can't make out. Finally,

he hangs up with whoever he was talking to. Turning to me, he says, “This is fucking great. You two are acting like children when we have the house being hit with a search warrant, and a raid on the whorehouse. That shouldn’t have even been touched with all the important clients that go there. Even worse, it appears we’ve got some injuries. You want to be a Second? Do your fucking job.”

With that, Keegan dashes out and leaves me in the study alone. The first thing I do is shoot off a message to Hollis, waiting for his response before I can deal with the whorehouse. At this point, dying would have been easier...

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

“This is usually Tennant’s job,” Carter says as he sits across from me and gives me an update on what our men are currently doing. “He and Joel handle all of this; I’m just their lackey.”

“He’s currently on my shitlist,” I reply.

“Roman...” Jude sighs, but I ignore him.

Carter’s gaze intensifies, his navy blue eyes darkening. “What happened?”

Curling my fingers into my palm, I tell him as calmly as I can. “He may have cost me my friendship with the only person who understood me.”

Carter’s expression softens. “Can you blame Lio for reacting in such a way after what happened? He fears for Benjamin’s life, and he doesn’t seem to be the type of person who lets his emotions guide him. With Allesandro gone, I’m sure it’s hitting him all the more.”

“I had nothing to do with that! The only bearing any of us have on Tennant and Benjamin’s relationship is being okay with it!”

“Are you?” Carter asks. “Or are you just saying that to make Tennant and Hollis happy.”

I glare at him. “Have you ever known me to keep my opinions to myself? I tried to stab you when I was fifteen because I was upset. Do you really think I’d hide my feelings about Tennant finding his perfect damn catnip?”

Carter sighs. “You're right. I just needed to be sure.”

I give him a strained smile. “And I appreciate that you care, but I can stand up for myself. Especially with something like this. Everything is just so...backwards right now.”

Carter's gaze softens. “Give Lio time, Figlio. Imagine if you were in his position, I'm sure you'd react the same way.”

I grimace. “Yeah... Tennant is lucky he only got tagged in the shoulder with Lio's knife.”

I know Lio, and I know how good he is with his knives now. Either he was too emotional to aim correctly, or he purposely aimed for Ten's arm. I'm grateful the wound wasn't serious, though I wouldn't have blamed Lio for showing Tennant how he isn't one to be fucked with. I'm not happy with either Ten or Benjamin's brand of fuckery right now.

At the same time... I can't be too upset. I admire how brave Benjamin is, and how he was able to do what none of us could—he pulled Tennant back from the edge.

Only Dad has ever been able to manage that. Not with sex, but I know both Dad and Ten have their fair share of scars from each other. Their lives are so intertwined that I'm honestly surprised it took Tennant this long to snap; it goes to show the strength he has.

I don't blame Benjamin for wanting to do what we—Jude, Hollis, and I—couldn't. Hollis would have stopped him from doing something irreversible, but even so, the damage would have been done.

Benjamin sacrificed himself for Tennant because he knew he had nothing else to

give, no chance to go up against Tennant, so he did the only thing he could. It won't be forgotten. I just hope Lio can eventually forgive him.

After Carter leaves the office, Jude rounds the desk and pulls me out of the chair. He sits and tugs me into his lap, holding me tightly.

“Are you sure this is what you want?”

I pull back enough to see his face, and so he can see me scowl. “I'm not a liar, not even to my dad, who I know would kick both Ten and Hollis's asses if I told him they were jerking me around.” I tilt my head. “Do you not want this?”

He gives me a small smile and pushes some of my hair away from my face. “I've never had a relationship before the three of you—I don't know if I ever said that. I didn't want one. My family was too complicated, for one, and people couldn't handle what I wanted, for another.” Skating his fingers down my cheek, he gently curls them under my chin, raising my face more and pressing a whisper-soft kiss to my lips.

“The three of you give me so much, and maybe this isn't what you want to hear, but it's what we need to be honest about. I don't need exclusivity to know you're mine, all of you. If Benjamin makes Tennant happy, or the Ten equivalent of that, who are we to stand in their way?”

I shudder from the soft touches and the love he pours into me without having to ever say the words. Not trusting my voice, I sign, “I know. I think I'm just...rattled. Even after Tennant marked Hollis, I didn't think he'd ever come close to killing one of us. At least, someone who wasn't me. We all know he'll probably kill me one day, but that's different.”

He snorts. “Does this change your opinion or feelings?”

“No!” I shout the word and Jude winces. “Sorry,” I sign.

He shakes his head and releases his grip on me enough to pull his hearing aids out.

“It's fine. I think it's safe to say you're being honest right now.”

I try to slide off his lap, but he holds me tightly around the waist.

“I had to check. You understand, right?”

I blow out a breath and nod. “Yeah. And I love you for it. I'm just...frustrated, and sad. It's like we take one step forward, only to get knocked back five. There's too much shit going on and it's... I just want Dad back. He'll know how to handle this.”

Tears fall and Jude is quick to wipe them away.

“We'll get him back, Tesoro Mio. That is what I'll die for.”

“Don't say that,” I whisper, hoping he can read my lips because I can't say the words, let alone sign them. “I can't lose any of you, it'd kill me.”

He holds me tighter. “I'm just being honest. I might not be as free with my affection as you and Hollis, or even Ten, but that doesn't mean I don't care.”

“I know. I love you, too. I don't need the words. Just being here is enough. Thank you. This,” I tell him, “Is part of the reason I chose you as my Second. You get me so well.”

“I try.”

I kiss him, slow and sweet, hoping to pour all of my emotions into the action.

When we pull back, he brushes away another rogue tear.

“Do you think Lio will let Benjamin come back?”

Jude huffs a laugh. “Something tells me Benjamin will keep the peace on a lot of things with Emilio, but staying away from Ten is not one of them.”

“I hope so.”

Before he can respond, his phone goes off from inside his pocket. He releases me and pulls it out. His expression darkens as he reads the text. Instead of saying anything, he hands me the phone and slides me off his lap.

With my heart in my throat, I read the message.

HOLLIS

Martellis were just served a warrant for their house, and there was a raid at their whorehouse. Need you on deck as Second.

“Fuck.” This is the last fucking thing any of us need.

Jude puts his hearing aids back in and I hand him the phone. “Thank you,” I tell him before he leaves.

“Whenever you need me, Tesoro Mio,” he replies before leaving me alone in the office.

As soon as the door shuts behind him, I cry. Because if his words were true, why do I feel so alone?

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

Leaving my best friend almost tore me in two, but fuck if he thinks I'm in the wrong on this. He always wanted me to stay away from Roman, but at least Roman never actively tried to kill me. Unlike fucking Tennant... The bruises around Benjamin's throat still disturb me. And now I have to deal with fucking cops!

Fervently wishing my Master was here, I try to remind myself that killing the police is not an option—right now. Once they get out of the house, all bets are off. But fuck, I hope Hollis comes through with all the promises of keeping our files safe.

Midas finds me, making it clear he's unhappy that there are intruders in the household, and I snort. Join the fucking club. I make it to the foyer and sneer at the cop standing there. "You have a warrant?"

"Search warrant." He smirks. "Plenty to look at in this mansion, isn't there?"

Midas growls and the cop becomes visibly uncomfortable. While part of me cheers, the other notes that his hand twitches towards his fucking gun. If he dares to shoot my dog... I take back what I said about not killing any cops right now.

I put a hand on Midas's head, urging him to back down. Fucking people. They see a boxer and make damn assumptions. Then again, Midas is trained to protect...

"Sergeant Mac," I acknowledge, noting his name for future reference. "I'd like to see the warrant. My lawyer should be here shortly."

"We'll go ahead and start," he says, mockingly sweet, as he practically shoves the warrant at me. Cops flood the house, all of them fanning out. Jenna better get here

fast.

“Oh—Mac, just for your information, everything will be recorded. You may want to let your buddies know.” I whirl away from him. There are so many of those fucking pests, I don’t even know who to follow.

I send out a text to the household letting them know what’s going on, and that they don’t need to answer any questions. The cops can follow the warrant to the letter, and that does not include harassing my staff.

“Actually...” Mac says in that same mocking tone, “if you’ll have everyone gather here, it would be best. After all, we don’t want anyone destroying evidence.” I grit my teeth as I send out another order.

Rolling my shoulders back, I wave him away, focusing on my phone instead. At least until Benjamin carefully approaches me. I really don’t have time to deal with that bullshit still.

He leans close to me, and eyeing the sergeant, he drops his voice to a whisper. “There’s been a raid on the whorehouse. I don’t know much, other than that there were injuries. I don’t even know who.”

The desire to swear chokes me, but I can’t let on that something is amiss in front of these fucking pigs.

Gritting my teeth, I turn my head slightly and meet my Second’s gaze. “Get over there. Find out what’s going on. Call Jenna. I need her here, but you’re going to need someone from her office. Tell her I want the best.”

“Yes, Boss.”

His sigh of relief doesn't last long when I tack on, "And take Ignacio with you. I don't need Chaos here while shit is going down. Report to me as soon as you know what's going on."

I turn away from him, unable to be in his presence for long. There's a beat of silence before he leaves. Ignacio follows less than five minutes later, tossing a concerned glance at me that I ignore. Those two can figure their shit out—or tell me which one to kill.

When everyone is gathered, Keegan comes to stand next to me. I'm not sure whether it's to protect me, or to stop me from making a stupid decision. Either way, he's probably right to do it. The maids are whispering to each other, but I shut them out, keeping my attention on the cops coming in and out of my sanctuary.

Jenna shows up not half an hour later, scowling at the cops. She's already in her bulldog mode, and I pass the search warrant over to her. It doesn't take her long to read over the fucking legalese.

"What the fuck is this? Search warrants are supposed to be narrow in scope. This...this is bullshit. When I get a hold of Judge Shelly, I'm going to make it clear this goes far beyond anything that should be done. Anything they get will be thrown out."

Her fury allows mine to back down slightly. Thank fuck Il Padrone found her and paid for her schooling. It's been worth every penny. Even if the retainer we pay is higher than most, she earns it. As long as she stays far away from Dr. Ranlen, because those two are a headache I do not need.

I let the next two fucking hours wash over me, stiffening as they take out computers and folders. I can see why Jenna said it was too broad.

Fucking hell. The BDSM play toys almost went out as well, before someone with fucking common sense pointed out what they were. Are these fuckers that unintelligent?

I bear the snickers as they talk about the nursery, taking in names. I won't forget them. I watch it all via my phone, after tapping into our security system.

Only one cop seems truly uncomfortable with this, and it snags my attention. He's not acting superior, or nervous about being here. If anything, he's dragging his feet. The sergeant barks at him repeatedly, but the officer doesn't speed up. He does a shitty job of searching when he can get away with it, and I hum as I contemplate what that means. Can I turn him? Or is he faking it?

I'm frustrated Benjamin hasn't called yet, but he won't unless it's safe to talk on both our ends. If these cops don't leave soon, I may duck out myself, as it's getting too much. Fuck it. I make a move to go forward, but Keegan stops me.

"Don't. You need to be here. Trust Benjamin and Ignacio."

Closing my eyes, I try to relax, but there's no way. Just as the fuckers are wrapping up, my phone finally dings. Reading it quickly, my heart sinks. What the fuck? I show it to Keegan and he gives a wordless growl. Whoever is responsible for not only taking Il Padrone, but injuring my closest, needs to pay.

They may have us circling as we try to staunch our bleeding, but it won't last. I will fucking destroy them all. They will tremble under me as I crush them—and I'll do it with a fucking smile. The chains holding me snap, and from the way Keegan grasps my shoulder, digging his fingers in, he must have realized it. Fuck it. Not even he can hold this back. I'm Il Padrone's, and it's time people remember that...

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

“G o,” Roman says. “Please, just...fucking go. I need you focused, and you’re not. Take Jude with you.”

I scowl. “I don’t need a babysitter.”

Roman straightens his spine, hands fisting at his sides, and his green eyes flash with a fire I’ve never seen before. “You do when you’ve proven you can’t be trusted right now.”

“Careful, Little Prince,” I say in a low tone, taking steps to round the desk. “You might be the Boss now, but you will watch how you talk to me.”

“Or what? You’re going to kill me?” he sneers.

“I might.” Leaning in, I have to hold back the smirk that wants to stretch across my lips as the flash of fear he can’t quite hide shows in his eyes. “You get under my skin, Little Prince. And that’s not always a good thing. I’d be very, very careful if I were you. No one, not even your father, gets away with disrespecting me.”

“Give me a reason to respect you then,” he says. “Until then, get out of here and get your shit under control.”

I tilt my head and just...look at him, wondering how long it’ll take until he breaks. Roman meets my gaze, and holds his own for longer than I thought before flinching.

With a smile, I reach out and run my fingers softly across his delectable mouth. “Such a brave giocattolo,” I whisper. “Voglio farti del male.”

He swallows. “You already have.”

I give him my most feral grin. “You haven’t seen anything yet.” Pulling away, I tuck my hands into my pockets. “But, I’ll do your bidding, Boss. Good luck with Petrov.”

Not that I believe he’ll need it. The Pakhan is only too happy to help us out—if it means he gets his next order free of charge, of course. Having the Bratva cause some chaos will keep the police occupied, especially with the Martellis’ mansion being raided.

Roman doesn’t respond, but I can feel his gaze burning a hole into my back as I leave the office. “Watch him carefully,” I tell Benji, barely getting his acknowledgement before I head down to Hollis’s office.

Jude has been getting direct updates on the situation at the Martellis’ from Hollis, as my Tesoro is shamelessly using his connection to the Martelli network to monitor the cameras in the mansion.

“Anything interesting happen?” I ask as I step into the room.

Hollis turns to me, and the action has Jude, who’s sitting next to him, look over as well. “Someone is going to end up in a sensitivity training class with the way they acted like the sex toys they found were both scandalous and hilarious,” Hollis replies dryly. “Other than that, the only other thing of note is Emilio sending Benjamin and Ignacio away—I’m assuming to the whorehouse.”

I frown at the knowledge that Chaos is alone with Benjamin, but I know better than to interfere. That is a situation I have to let Benjamin handle on his own, and unlike my first impression of him, I believe he can. Though it stirs my protective instincts at the same time.

I built the boy up and saw through the bullshit, but the time I invested in helping him come into his own could easily be thrown away if Chaos hasn't learned from his mistakes. I know how much Benjamin still cares, even if those feelings have gotten lost in the madness.

Not only that, Benjamin faced the monster head on and didn't flinch. That alone makes me want to do whatever it takes to keep him in one piece.

"I'm going to go have some fun with that other cop Joel picked up. I need to expel some energy, and Roman practically shoved me out the door," I tell my lovers. "You're coming with me," I sign to Jude.

"Okay," he says without hesitating. "I don't think I'm needed here anyway." He looks to Hollis for confirmation.

"Still haven't heard from Benjamin?" Hollis asks absently, watching the monitors.

"No," Jude answers. "Not that I expect to for a while yet, if at all. They're a bit busy right now." He gestures to the monitors. "And with the way Lio reacted... Well, I wouldn't be surprised if he's put a gag order on his people."

"That'd be counterproductive," I say. "Emilio is hurt and emotional right now, but he's not stupid."

Leandro snorts and chimes in. "You're applying logic to the situation when, not too long ago, you were irrational yourself. Don't cast stones in a glass house, Ten."

I ignore the little shit, choosing to bite my tongue rather than engage. I'd hate to discover just how good Boston's training was should I turn my focus onto the boy.

"Let's go. I need to spill some blood, and I'm unwanted here, so might as well make

myself useful.”

Hollis frowns, but doesn't say anything, though I'm sure he'll check on Roman as soon as I leave, which is for the best; he's far better equipped to handle the emotional boy than I am.

Jude pushes away from the desk and stands, grabbing his suit jacket from the back of his chair. I can't help but admire how well he fills out a suit. His previous protests about wearing one have eased with time, and it's...a joy to have something pretty to look at.

“Contact me if you need to, and Joel is around, so he can get ahold of me, too,” I tell Hollis before spinning on my heel and heading to the front door. I don't wait to see if Jude follows, either he does or he doesn't. Right now, the need to spill blood is too strong to care about anyone else.

Almost.

As I head to the detached garage, I pull my phone out and open a new text thread with Benjamin.

TENNANT

I'm here if you need me, Topolino. *Anything* you might need.

I put my phone away without waiting for a response. Not that I'm expecting one now, but the overprotectiveness currently running through me says letting him know I'm still here—even if my control remains a little loose—is important.

In the garage, I head to one of the SUVs and lean against it, watching as Jude and his bodyguard enter behind me. “You can follow us,” I tell Killian, as I open the driver's

side door and climb in.

Jude slowly makes his way to the vehicle. Whether he's doing it on purpose, or due to his leg, I don't know, but the seconds tick down as I wait for him to slide into the passenger seat.

"You holding up well?" I ask, flipping the visor down and grabbing the keys.

"Sore, but I've done a lot of activity since Cristian and Il Padrone were taken, so I'm not surprised. Don't worry, I can still keep up with you."

I grin at him. "Good."

At my torture chamber, I lead the way directly to where the cop is being held. Usually, I have them brought to me, but I don't have time for games today, not when I'm this keyed up.

As soon as the door to his room is opened, he tries to jump up, but the chain around his neck prevents any quick movements.

"I figured you'd be bored by now," I say conversationally as I walk into the room. "So I thought I'd come entertain you—or rather, you will be my entertainment."

"They know you have me," he says, trying to go for bored but failing miserably.

Under the stench of his unwashed body, I can almost smell his fear. I can certainly see it. The way his eyes are wide, and how he can't help but lick his lips, and shift on his feet; easy tells that make me grin.

"I'm sure they do, but they'll never prove it."

Pulling out a pair of gloves, I slip them on and then reach into my jacket for a knife. His spine straightens and he lifts his head as much as he can with the chain.

“You can't get away with killing us all.”

“Watch me.”

I hold out the knife to him, handle first. He stares at it before looking back up into my eyes, his own dark blue ones full of confusion.

“Come on, Officer,” I say gently. “Surely you've seen a knife before.”

“I'm not falling for your tricks.”

I shrug. “No tricks here. If you don't want a weapon, that's your call—it's a stupid one, but your prerogative.”

Flipping the knife in my hand, I gesture to the chain and look at Jude, who hovers in the doorway. “Bring him into the main room.”

Leaving the cell, I head to where the best fun can be had, though I don't bother with any of my toys. No, that's too easy; I want—no, I need—something more interesting right now.

Jude drags our friendly neighborhood cop into the room by the chain. The asshole's litany of curses don't seem to bother him, though there's a good chance he turned his hearing aids down so he wouldn't have to hear it.

Deciding not to test the theory, I simply sign, “Unchain him and then get out of the way.”

Jude does as ordered, and the cop actually looks confused, glancing between the two of us.

“Is this some kind of game?”

I laugh. “It can be. This is where you fight for your right to live. Impress me and I'll let you go.”

He snorts. “You think I'm actually stupid enough to believe that?”

I shrug. “Believe me or don't, I don't care. Why would I lie to you? I have no reason to.”

Shifting on my feet, I ease into an obvious fighting pose. “Your options are: fight for your life, or have your skin peeled off one strip at a time. Makes no difference to me, both will be highly entertaining.”

With narrowed eyes, he rushes at me, giving no thought to strategy or finesse. How sad.

I take a few hits, letting him think he can get one over on me, as I deliver a few glancing blows of my own.

My shoulder aches like a motherfucker, but I don't pay it any mind. The pain is invigorating, adding to the adrenaline already pumping through my system.

I take a hit to the face as my opponent goes for the knife in my hand, one of his palms grabbing at my wrist and twisting, forcing me to drop the blade.

Sadly for him, the move puts him in too close a proximity, and before he can even correct his grip on the knife, I pull out another.

His cry of pain as I grab him by the wrist, pulling him in and slicing across his hand—deep enough to sever tendons—is beautiful.

The knife he stole falls uselessly to the ground and I tsk. “You're not doing such a good job at proving yourself.”

“Not all of us are psychotic assholes,” he growls.

Frowning, I take a few steps away from him as I say, “Now, that's not nice. You wouldn't like it if I called you names, would you?”

“Fuck off!” he shouts. “Just kill me. I did what you said, I fought you; so either kill me or let me go.”

I sigh. “You're so boring . But...if that's what you want...”

Stalking forward, I catch him as he turns to flee, my laugh bouncing off the high ceiling. Surely he didn't think he would get anywhere? He's trapped in here with me and my Little Lamb until I say otherwise. Even so, if he did manage to leave the room, the guards wouldn't hesitate to put him down.

Stupid, stupid cop. It's no wonder one of them decided to go rogue. They just don't make them like they used to.

Shoving him down, I find it all too easy to flip him onto his back. He tries to buck me off, writhing beneath me for all he's worth, but any hit he manages to land goes unnoticed as I'm focused on my task.

He tries to headbutt me, and I barely avoid it, grabbing him by the hair in retaliation and slamming his head into the concrete floor. If I wanted, I could do that a few dozen times—smash his skull open on the floor. Instead, I leave it at just the once,

now that he's dazed and still beneath me.

With a few quick clicks of my wrist, I cut his already tattered and dirty shirt open, baring his hairy and softening torso to me.

“So much room to play,” I mutter to myself, as I drag the top of my knife down his sternum, though I am careful not to dig in.

Adjusting my grip on the knife, I begin to carve into his skin, letting his cries of pain and pleading words fuel me.

When I'm done—sad I can't feel his blood on my skin, but I can't risk leaving DNA on the body—I give into my urge and slam his head against the floor until he stops moving.

I do it a few more times for good measure, listening to the crack of breaking bones, and the squish of brain matter smooshing into the floor.

When I'm finished, I stand and carefully remove my gloves, dragging a finger over the blood on my knife and sighing in satisfaction as the sticky substance coats my skin.

Jude makes his way over, and after he studies the body for a long moment, he looks at me. “Dirty?”

I shrug, staring down at the word carved into the dead man's chest. “As we've been saying all along, a dirty cop is a dirty cop, whether they're on our side or not. Look at how easily he turned—not on us, but the badge in general.

“I highly doubt most of the people on our mystery adversary's side are truly in it for ‘justice’. No, they just want to make a quick buck, no matter who is holding the cash.

Whatever this guy is using as leverage—aside from money and his precious justice—it won't save any of them in the end.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

Being in the limo with Benjamin is so incredibly painful—it's wave after wave of pain, self-loathing, and desire. He's so close, but always so far away now.

I bite back my questions about the bruises around his neck. I know they've likely been caused by the man I hate. Tennant may as well have taken a gun to my head and pulled the trigger. I'm left out in the cold, unable to find any warmth. What's the point of living without the love of my life?

"Fuck. Jenna's sending her partner, but she warned me not to show up at the whorehouse. Not when they're still processing the scene." Benjamin knocks his head against the back of his seat, and my fingers twitch to reach out and reassure him. Grinding my teeth, I force myself to stay still.

"She has a point. Her partner can help process the scene. Do we know who was injured? We can start there."

Benjamin shakes his head, bending over his phone as he rapidly sends out texts. Part of me wants to take over, to reduce his stress, but the other part knows to keep back. I've learned my lesson when it comes to trying to step in front of him. It's clear he doesn't need someone to act as his shield anyway. Fuck. All those months... I snort quietly as I think about how my desire to protect him set everything on fire.

It must not have been quiet enough because Benjamin looks up, cocking his head in a silent request that I talk. It's the last thing I want to do. Clearing my throat, I give him a wry smile. "Just admiring how well you're doing. And recognizing how much I fucked up."

There's silence before he finally speaks. It's in a deliberate, slow manner that's completely inarguable. "You did. And I can't do this right now. It's not the time."

Inclining my head, I agree. This isn't the time to talk about relationship problems. Although, can it even be called 'relationship problems' when the relationship itself has crumbled to dust?

Breathing out, I try to let it go. Right now, there's nothing that can be done. When he growls at a text, I have a sinking feeling things are going to get worse for us.

"What did you find?" I swallow when he looks up at me, rage dancing in his eyes.

"They shot one of Antonio's lovers. I'm not sure how bad. Possibly worse than that, Antonio has been hauled into the police station."

"Fuck. Which one of the twins?"

Benjamin growls out, "I'm not sure. Who the fuck just says 'one of the twins'? It's not like they're the same fucking person."

"Let me call Sarah. She may be able to reach out to the hospital using her credentials. She's still the hospital administrator, even though she's been recalled to help us."

Snapping his fingers, he points at me. "Yes. That. That's what I need from you."

Trying not to smile, I call Sarah to get the information. Once she tells me she'll get back with me, there's nothing we can do but wait. We can't head to the whorehouse, we're not sure whether we'd be allowed at the hospital, and fuck knows neither of us want to be near the cops right now.

The limo pulls over and we sit there, not saying a word. It's uncomfortable, which is

something I've never experienced with him. Fuck if I don't know the limits right now.

Sighing, he finally caves to the silence. "We may as well talk."

He states it so simply, but what the hell do I say? How do I avoid the traps of the past and move forward? He's no longer the same person, neither of us are. We couldn't leave captivity and torture behind like it was nothing. I just didn't notice he was drowning—possibly because I was too.

"It was a good move to clean out the house. I never suspected a search warrant. This situation is fucking bizarre. I'm not sure if they're trying to focus more on taking us down, since the heads of the Family aren't here, or prevent us from finding them. It's stupid to think we can't find a way through this. There's always been a contingency. I don't know the Amatos well, we've never been this close an ally, but I sure as hell know Lio has been trained, and can handle shit. And Lio picked the right Second on this."

The look of relief on his face kills me. I know it's not the compliment, it's the fact I'm not pushing to talk about anything personal. It's a bittersweet feeling to do what's right for once. He accused me of not listening to him before, but I sure as fuck will from now on—what he says with his words and his body.

"You're right. We do need to figure out the split though. And I'd feel better if I could figure out who the fuck is doing this."

"Hmm. I can't give you an answer, but maybe think of why? It may lead you to who. These are law enforcement officers. They're used to coloring within the lines. What would make them break that?

"You were from outside of the Family and were brought in. Even after being brought

in, you stayed out of the dirty part for quite a while. Ask yourself, what made you change? Perhaps that's why the person in charge did as well."

"Oh, fuck," he breathes. "You're so right. I can't believe I was so stupid. We've been thinking about this all wrong. Focusing too much on someone trying to take us both down. The reason I first broke into doing something against how I was raised was because of Lio. The fucking Fire Chief."

I nod, remembering that moment well—and fondly, even if that is fucked up. Then again, I do enjoy some bloodthirstiness. He's far exceeded that now, and I have to mentally adjust to that. I'm not sure whether I truly like it or not, but he's certainly blossomed under Lio's care. Fuck if I'll give Tennant any credit for my Little Mouse's growth.

"Right. So, we're probably looking for someone who has lost a person close to them."

Growling, Benjamin makes a slashing gesture, shaking his head. "No, it doesn't even need to be a loss. It could be a significant injury. Or fuck, even the threat, like Lio was for me. It depends on how close the person was to this fucking Judas. But how the hell do I find them with that many possibilities? It's like looking for a needle in a bunch of other needles."

"Hmm. Well, we know the Amatos are stronger at this. They have Hollis and Leandro." I force myself to say it, not wanting to give any acknowledgment to them, but the way Benjamin lights up, it was the right thing to do.

"You're right. Let me text Hollis." His face goes white as he glances up at me. "Leandro..."

I bite my tongue and raise an eyebrow, as if in question. But I know what he's

thinking. Leandro is Tennant's son. I wonder if he's willing to be a step-father already...

My phone lights up and I answer it quickly, listening to Sarah's rapid instructions. Hanging up, I gesture to Benjamin that we can get moving. Grimly, I say, "It was Nicolo who was hit. It doesn't look good. We can head to the hospital. There's a cop on the premises, but Sarah says they're going to pull him soon. Something about there not being enough evidence for them. Whatever magic Antonio did at the whorehouse, it must have worked. A bigger problem is how they still managed to pick Antonio up..."

Benjamin curses and bangs on the partition between the driver and us, snapping out instructions to get to the hospital immediately. Breathing out, his eyes that are full of fire meet mine, and I am sure they match his vitriol. We can't keep having our men picked up, and I'm fucking sure we can't have any taken from us permanently.

"I need my Chaos. I want to know what the cops are planning. And we deserve payback."

I smile in anticipation, my skin already tingling with excitement. As soon as we get to the hospital and check what's going on, I'll be off. It's time to spread a little fun around. "Yes, Boss. My pleasure."

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

“U h,” Leandro says. “That’s interesting.”

“What is?” I look over to where he’s sitting at his desk.

“I’m not sure what I’m looking at exactly. Benjamin’s brother seems as boring as their parents, but interestingly enough, he was paying some dude money, good money. First, on a regular basis, then just every once in a while. He hasn’t paid for a bit, though, and when I looked into the dude receiving the payments, I found out he died from some heart thing, even though no one knew he had problems with his health.”

I sigh. “Sometimes people get unlucky. Stop looking into Benjamin, we have more important things to do.”

Leandro meets my eyes, giving me the navy blue dead stare I’ve learned over the years to stand my ground against. “If he’s going to be my other step-dad, I need to make sure he’s good enough for Tennant. Roman and you have kept me away from the Martellis thus far, which, rude. So, I’ve had to look into things myself. You might be okay with letting some stranger come into your life, but I’m not.”

I wonder if I can throw my knife at him faster than he can shoot me. It’s not worth the risk, but sometimes, it’s really fucking tempting. Being the mentor and stand-in parent for a twenty-one-year-old psychopathic mimic is...exhausting. Especially when he has a... unique way of showing he cares about people.

“Do you think Ten would notice if I borrowed one of his torture rooms for a bit?”

“No,” I say, making sure my tone is firm. “You are not going to torture Benjamin’s brother. Whatever he was into, it seems to have stopped, yes?”

He glances back at his monitor and does a bit of scrolling. “I mean, there hasn’t been any suspicious activity since the last payment, but you have to admit, it’s odd.”

“It doesn’t concern us.” I watch him carefully as I speak. “You will not, and I mean it, will not go about snooping into Benjamin’s family. Understand? They’re perfectly normal, boring people who don’t need to be brought into this. Shady transactions or not.

“Benjamin, despite being Emilio’s best friend, and a little unhinged himself, is a kind and honest person. He’s good for Tennant, in a way Roman, Jude, and I can’t be. We will let him have this because we care, and want him to be happy. Right?”

I get a blank stare, but he does seem to be listening, so I wait him out. I’ve learned that patience, and a good dose of firmness, is needed when dealing with Leandro. I’ve also had to quickly learn how to read the boy. He is way too good at mimicking how most people respond to things. If you don’t know him, it’s too easy to take him at face value.

We should probably worry more about that, but...he’s good at staying within the boundaries Tennant and I set for him—most of the time.

“I mean it, Leandro. You don’t want Tennant to catch wind that you’re looking into Benjamin and his family. He means a lot to Ten. I’ve never seen him this way. Even when he fell for Roman, he wasn’t this reckless. Benjamin brings something to the table that Tennant needs, a softness mixed with his ability to stand up to him, not just beside him.”

“Roman’s not enough?” There’s a coldness to Leandro’s tone that scares me.

“It’s different.” How the hell do you explain the nuances of the human psyche to someone like Leandro? His baseline for emotions is zero. It’s why he uses Roman as an example when he needs to pretend to feel something.

“Tennant is everything to all of us, but he’s Cristian’s first. He molded himself to be what the Boss needed him to be from a very young age. And after Cristian saved him from the hospital, that cemented whatever loyalty and weird imprinting thing that was already between them.

“Tennant and I...” I sigh and try to find the right words for the both of us. “It was the first sign of trust for us both. Outside of my siblings, I didn’t trust anyone—I couldn’t fathom it, nor could Ten. He didn’t expect to have anyone on his side, except Cristian. We fell into what we have after he stalked me.”

Leandro snorts at that, and I have to smile a little. The whole situation was ridiculous, but utterly perfect in a weird Tennant way.

“I keep him human, but he needs more than that. He needs the vulnerability Roman brings, and the challenge Jude does. And the softness mixed with a not-quite-realized bloodthirstiness that Benjamin has, though I think he’s coming into that quickly.”

Leandro grimaces. “More is not merrier, but I don’t judge.”

I laugh. “I hope someone sweeps you out of your chair one day.”

He sneers. “They better fucking not, unless they want to discover if dicks can be reattached or not. I dare someone to touch me.”

Snorting, I shake my head. “I didn’t mean it literally, but I do agree that they need your consent first.”

He rolls his eyes. “Right, because you and Ten take consent so seriously.”

I sober up. “We do. Just because we like to play games, doesn’t mean anything. I know if I was really uncomfortable and against the things we do, Tennant would stop them. He’s very much in tune with my wants and needs. If someone doesn’t, Leandro, if you feel as if someone disrespects your limits, don’t think you have to deal with that on your own.”

He smiles, a sinister grin that would terrify me if I didn’t know him as well as I do. In truth, I probably know him better than even Roman does—the boy only sees what Leandro wants him to. “You don’t have to worry about me, Hollis. I can take care of myself. Not only that, the games I play are fully consensual...even when they’re not.”

I decide not to ask any more questions. There are some things a parent really doesn’t need to know. Especially when it comes to the question of whatever type of sex life Leandro may or may not have. Asexual and touch adverse, he may be, but he’s not sex adverse, at least, according to Roman. He’s also a devious fucker, so who knows what “games” he’s playing. I just hope the poor sucker under his thumb knows what they’re doing.

Before I can think any harder about it, my phone goes off with a text from Benjamin. As I read it, my respect for Ignacio goes up—thankfully, as I really was starting to question Il Padrone’s choice in him—because someone should have fucking seen it, or thought of it. But then again...we’ve been running in so many directions since all this started, it’s impossible to consider all theories at once.

“I’m going to forward you this text?—”

“Don’t bother,” Leandro says. “I’m already on it. I can’t fucking believe I didn’t consider the motive behind all this.”

I look over at the boy, who's already busy typing something. "Get out of Benjamin's texts," I order. "Actually, pull out of his phone entirely. I swear to fuck, Leandro, I will ground you if you don't stop doing shit like this."

He blinks innocent eyes at me. "I told you, I had to make sure he was good enough for my dad. Which, considering he still hasn't responded to Ten's message, I have to say, it's not looking good."

I roll my eyes. "In case you haven't noticed, they're dealing with a lot of shit over there. Knowing Ten, it's nothing important; he wouldn't want to distract Benjamin. I bet if I looked into it, it'd be some words of encouragement, wouldn't it?"

He huffs. "Still. It's impolite."

"Leandro..." I say in a warning tone. "We don't have time for your shit. I will ground you until your next birthday."

"That's almost a year!"

"Exactly. So, think very carefully."

"I'm an adult now, you can't do that."

"Wanna bet?"

He glares, but turns back to his monitor and I do the same. "So, we're narrowing our search parameters," he says, fully in work mode now. "Are we still saying the asshole's probably a fed of some kind?"

I nod, even though he's not looking in my direction. "Yes, I still think that makes the most sense with the type of reach they have, not only with the locals, but the way

they're able to organize and orchestrate everything.

"It'd make sense, too. We mostly have the locals doing our bidding—even the ones not bought off or indebted to us in some way. A fed would be stupid enough to tangle with either Family in a way that the locals won't. If they're lax enough to not keep tabs on what their loved ones are doing, that's on them, not us."

Leandro hums. "They're either cocky as hell, or just that desperate. I can't understand the latter, but well, I'd probably burn the world down for Roman—especially if it'd make him feel better. He's so sad right now, it's getting on my damn nerves." He scoffs and says, "Don't tell him I said that, about burning the world for him, I mean. I don't care if he knows he's irritating the fuck outta me."

I laugh a little. "Your secret is safe with me. You wanna do deaths, and I'll look into the ones who had someone hurt enough to be life-impeding? I'm not sure a threat would be enough. It's not our style to threaten loved ones directly—though the Martellis might be different. I'll make a call to Keegan to get his opinion on that."

"Sounds good. Once we have the parameters for what we're looking for, I'll start building the automation, though I'm still working on that skill—H is far better."

"I still haven't ruled out calling him, but we have enough of a shitstorm on our hands with Emilio being pissed about Tennant going feral on Benjamin. I'd rather let that calm before doing something else he protested against. Start the program and I'll finish it."

The sounds of both of us typing soon becomes the only noise in the room—with the occasional snore or snort from Boston, until one of Leandro's guards takes her out for a break.

The familiarity of it all calms some nerves, and everything else begins to fade away

as I put in a call to Keegan and the three of us work on narrowing our search for whoever stole our Bosses even further.

By the time we're done, no stone will be left unturned, and it's only a matter of time before the bloodshed we're all craving rains down.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

They've left me here in the interrogation room to sit in silence, while they confer behind that mirror. Oh, they must know by now that they fucked up. And not just because they shot my lover. My hands turn to fists as I think of Nicolo.

No, they fucked up because there was nothing there to find. There were no records. None of the whores had anything to say, except for how pleasant their stay was, and that they'd never be caught soliciting. The Martellis are philanthropists, helping those in need.

Truly, Angel has been, well, an angel. She knew what to do, the right pressure and bribes needed. The cops can't flip any of them.

By now, those fuckers have to be shitting themselves. Especially because they shot an unarmed man who showed no fucking aggression. Oh, they think I didn't hear about how they plan to spin this. We've got fucking cameras recording everywhere. They'll show that all Nicolo did was step in front of me when they came bursting in without even a damn knock. And yes, our lawyer will bring up the no knocking thing as well. Because while they assumed it was a business, it's not. It's private fucking property for a reason, assholes.

So I sit, I wait, and I plan to squeeze every bit of information out of them. They think they can play me? Watch and learn, fuckers. Watch. And. Learn.

Finally, the door opens, and I keep my anger banked far below the surface, so it doesn't show. The first man who stumbles in tries to glare at me, but his eyes are a little too wide. Sweat dots his forehead, as if he thinks I'll jump up and kill him in this very room. He's a little on the stocky side, and there's nothing special about his

brown eyes. But hmm, the asshole behind him? This makes things more interesting... He's gotta be a fucking fed.

Plain enough suit—untailored, of fucking course—desperately in need of a good stylist, because that haircut is ridiculous, and while on the thin side, I'm sure that horrible suit covers some serious muscles. But his eyes? Now those are much more interesting. They're brown as well, but the intensity in them...that's quite enjoyable. I'd love to have him at my feet, even if it's just to kill him.

Pretending to be innocent, I ask pleadingly, "How is my friend? Is he okay? Did we get Swatted? Are you here to help?"

The fed can't keep in his snort, and I force myself to remain calm. The cop cringes, his eyes darting between us both. I've given him a golden opportunity and he knows it. Will he bite? Just how much is the fed running this goddamn shitshow?

"So, you're Antonio Martelli." I cock my head at the fed who spoke, the cop remaining silent as they sit.

It's not a question, so I don't respond. Hell, I'm sure they expected me to ask for a lawyer by now. That's the only reason the fed is in the room. I haven't asked, so he wants to play with me. Good luck. I love games.

Tapping his fingers on the desk, he says, "You have nothing to say?"

"I'm sorry, was that a question? You have my ID. Do you need to know more about me so we can figure this out? Am I being targeted? Do I need protection?" I have to bite the inside of my cheek at that, and seeing the way the fed flushes? Ah, yeah. Pressure point, baby.

"Do you need protection," he says flatly, his nostrils flaring at the very thought.

“Why would a renowned criminal—one of the so-called Martelli Boys—need protection? Or are you wanting to give up the Family? I suppose, I could find a deal for you...depending, of course, on your information.”

Shifting my stare to the cop, I ignore the fed, wanting to rile him up more. “What’s he talking about? You know my family works for the good of the people. And how much we contribute to charity. Especially the ones that benefit those in Blue who protect us. It’s why I’m so worried that we’ve had such a case of mistaken identity.”

The cop looks like he wants to be anywhere but here. He’s not one I’ve dealt with personally, or even recognize the name of. Then again, this really isn’t my department.

Swallowing, he nods toward me. “We, uh, do appreciate the contribution, but the, uh, general understanding is?—”

“What understanding? That we’re some sort of criminal family? If that’s what you believe, I’m sure those police charities would never have accepted a dime from us. That would be like...bribery or something.”

Hiding my smirk as the cop goes deathly white, I go to push further but the table jumps from fists hitting it. I turn my attention to the fed having an outburst instead. At least the cop has his name tag in place. Just who is this fucker?

“Bribery? You want to talk fucking bribery? Your so-called family—ruthless criminals, who have no morals, no boundaries, and care nothing for anyone except themselves—are willing to bribe anyone they want. And it isn’t always through these see-through charities. No, you walk around as if you are above the law. You do whatever the hell you want. But I’m here to tell you no, to show you that you aren’t above the law.”

I blink at him in astonishment. I was only pushing for a bit of information, does he know how much he just dropped in my lap? If this fucker isn't behind Il Padrone's disappearance—or at least tied to someone who is—I'd be very fucking surprised.

The cop reaches out and touches the fed's jacket, a silent gesture that does nothing to decrease the man's ire. Instead, he pushes away from the table, storming out and letting the door bang shut.

"My friend?" I ask again, trying to ignore the man who left, even though I want to ask lots of questions. No, it's not something that I can learn right here.

"Ah, yes. Nicolo. I'm so very sorry that it happened. We obviously found no evidence that you were doing anything untoward. I think you're likely right, and someone called in a false alarm. I promise, the cop who shot Nicolo will be placed on administrative duties until we know more. Until then, why don't we have someone drive you to the hospital? I sincerely apologize."

If I thought the officer was on the verge of breaking down before, it has nothing on the way his hands shake as he pushes his chair back and stands. He gestures for me to follow him, and despite his choppy movements, he makes rather good time as we go through the maze of the bullpen toward the lobby. I almost laugh as silence envelops the room when we walk through it. As soon as they notice me, especially seeing I'm not restrained or arrested, the stillness that hits is rather entertaining.

Once we're in the lobby, I turn toward him and decide to ask my questions anyway. "Officer McPhearson, who was the other guy? I mean, I don't want to file an official complaint, but I need to at least let my lawyer know who I spoke with."

Officer McPhearson's shoulders slump as he mutters, "That was Federal Agent Tom Court."

“Thank you, Officer. It does appear my ride is waiting here, so you don’t need to spend valuable time on me when you can be searching for those responsible for trying to harm my family. We don’t want this city to be hurt.”

His mouth hangs open, but before he can do more than splutter, I sail out of the lobby with one of our drivers trailing behind me. I slide into the backseat of the limo, all too ready for whatever alcohol is stashed here in the back. I don’t even need to direct the driver, he’ll head straight to the hospital.

That’s where the cops are dead wrong. Our men? They’re loyal to us. Dirty cops forget loyalty, but we’ll remind them—joyfully.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

When I was young and impressionable, and only wanted to get the attention of the man sitting across from me, I would have found the silence between us oppressive. Now, after carving out a life for myself in a world I was always told didn't want me because of who and how I loved, I feel nothing but pity for my father.

At this point, it's almost cruel keeping him alive. Except, forcing him to watch me live and thrive in a way he hates brings me immense pleasure.

"When are you going to claim your birthright?" Georgio asks into the silence, his blue eyes narrowing slightly. "Or are you hoping for a miracle?"

It takes all of my control to not react to his questioning. "I see you're very worried about your son-in-law," I reply lightly.

Georgio's eyes flash with hatred, and his lip curls up in distaste. "I'm just wondering if you have a plan, should the worst happen. You don't want to be caught unaware. It's how your enemy will get you."

"You'd know all about that, wouldn't you, Georgio?"

"I haven't been a threat to your precious family for a long time. You saw to that. Which is why it disappoints me that you let your husband control what's rightfully yours."

I bite my tongue to keep from protesting that by birthright, the De Luca Family, is not mine, but my nephew's. Not that I can ever allow my father to know about him. Despite Georgio's assurances that he's been collared all this time, I know for a fact

that if he ever learned about Julian's son, he wouldn't hesitate to put me down.

My brother may have been a psychotic asshole, and my father's perfect heir, but he apparently had some type of brain in his head, since he didn't tell Georgio about his bastard. It's something I, and my entire family, feel strongly about as well. We saw what Georgio turned Julian into, in the name of making him his heir, like hell was I going to let him corrupt someone else, or worse, considering the boy isn't up to Georgio's standards of perfection .

"Even if Cristian dies, I wouldn't take over. Roman is perfectly capable of being in charge; he's done well so far."

Whatever scathing comment Georgio may have been about to make is lost in the sounds of glass breaking and rapid gunfire.

I'm out of my chair instantly, gun in hand. "Get down," I order Georgio.

He scoffs and says something, but I don't pay attention, too focused on the fact that someone dared to attack part of the Amato main Family. Because, as much as I may hate my father, he is part of the Family, whether any of us like it or not.

Stepping out of the office, I don't see any of the guards, but that isn't a red flag, not when the sounds of gunfire seem to be erupting from all over. Keeping close to the wall, gun at the ready, I carefully make my way down the hall to the front door. While I trust every man on guard duty—they were handpicked by me and Ten after all—that doesn't mean I can just sit back and do nothing.

Before I get too far down the hall, an explosion from somewhere deeper in the house grounds me to a halt. The building shakes and I duck, throwing my arms over my head as ringing begins in my ears.

After a moment, I straighten up and get my balance back, blocking out the incessant beeping from the smoke alarms. Georgio yells my name and I spin around, gun pointed at him. “Do you want to get killed?” I hiss. “We don’t know how many of them there are, or how far they’ve infiltrated.”

He crosses the distance between us quickly, a gun clutched in his hand. “I’d rather not be a sitting duck. I can protect myself.”

“I hope so, because like hell am I going to save your ass,” I lie. He doesn’t need to know I’d only save him so that I can one day kill him myself.

Before he can respond, another explosion rocks the house. “Fucking assholes,” Georgio snarls. “The final repairs only just got finished from the last time someone tried to kill me.”

I stifle a laugh and lead the way to the foyer, where the sounds of a gunfight can be heard.

Georgio doesn’t say a word about me going first, and I fight hard not to roll my eyes. Missing a hand or not, I would never let Roman go ahead of me. I’d die for my son, unlike Georgio, who’s happy to let everyone else take the fall, despite all his talk and bravado.

I just hope Georgio’s been practicing shooting one-handed since I cut the other one off, because the last thing I want is to be shot in the back by the fucker.

Turning the corner, gun at the ready, I quickly take in the situation, years of training allowing me to assess the threat risk.

There are bodies on the ground, and right away I can tell it’s more of our guys than the enemy’s, the surprise attack working in their favor. Without hesitation, I begin

shooting at the hostiles, hitting one in the shoulder, making them stumble, and causing enough distraction that one of the remaining guards is able to get a headshot.

Once they realize I'm on scene, all of the hostile guns turn to me. A normal person would probably fear for their lives, but after all the shit I've lived through the last twenty years, a few guns pointed at me is nothing.

One of the guards moves in front of me, and I try not to growl at them, knowing they're just doing their job. As Cristian's husband, I'm afforded protections and privileges most aren't, and situations like this make it hard to remember that I'm not just a guard anymore.

Stumbling back when the guard in front of me is shot and begins to collapse backward, I get hit in the arm, a hiss of pain escaping my throat.

My gun clicks empty and I curse. I don't have a spare magazine on me, as I didn't expect something like this to happen. All our cars are equipped with weapons and ammunition, but the need for carrying it on me hasn't arisen since giving up my position as part of the Amato guard.

"Give me your gun," I tell Georgio, who's somehow managed to make it into the foyer without getting hit.

He tries to protest, but I ignore him, shoving my gun back into its holster and reaching for his.

I notice the explosive too late.

As one of the bastards tosses the device at us, I shove Georgio away from me, while the last remaining Amato guard grabs me and pulls me in the opposite direction.

A flash of light blinds me as the sound of the explosion echoes around the marbled foyer. Pain explodes through my head as I slam into something.

My last conscious thought is of my son, and how sorry I am that he's about to lose both of his fathers.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

“ At this point, I’m willing to concede the bet if at least we get saved.” I’m fucking tired, and my missing finger hurts like hell. At least they patched me up, but fuck if I don’t miss Sarah.

“I’m more worried about what’s happening if they haven’t found us yet,” Cristian says grimly, and we both share a grimace. Both of us have had the pleasure of news articles being thrown at us.

The door bangs open and I roll my eyes at the men who come in, masked as always, with guns trained on Cristian and me. Even with the guns, they keep back. Fuckers know better than to get too close to me. I’m certain Cristian can hold his own as well.

Whistling precedes the fucker who kidnapped us. I’d rather have Cristian’s fucking Christmas music over this guy’s fucked up choices, like “Don’t Worry Be Happy”.

He pushes a damn cart in front of him as he enters. It doesn’t escape me that there’s two fucking dog bowls on top, but my stomach drops when I spy a newspaper. I’m ready to buy every fucking newspaper out there and burn them down.

Cristian and I exchange a quick glance, wondering whose turn it is to face whatever shitstorm this asshole has created. The fucker must have wanted to be an actor because he grabs the article, clears his throat, and with a bright smile, tosses it right to me, relishing his fucking dramatics.

I let it fall to the ground, refusing to even look at it. Fuck. That. Shit. I have no desire to let this asshole see any of my reactions—at least, live in-person. I’m aware of that damn camera regularly.

“Pick it up.” The man’s voice is soft but steely. At my silent refusal, he shakes his head. “If you don’t, I’ll put a bullet in Cristian, and leave you here without any food.”

Considering he brought us dog dishes, I’m not too concerned about skipping a meal. However, if I let Cristian die, his Family would probably be pissed. And since his son is my Emilio’s friend, I can’t hurt my Caro.

Biting back a retort, I bend down and pick up the article. Scanning it, I struggle to keep my face blank. Fucking pigs went through my house? There will be repercussions for this. The more I read, the harder it is to keep silent. The whorehouse raid isn’t as shocking, although we should have been covered there. I wonder what the fucking governor is thinking right now. He’d better start bringing these LEOs in line if he doesn’t want his own enjoyment to be made public.

When I get to the end, I can’t quite hide my expression, and I know our captor picks up on it. His evil laughter makes me want to ball this paper up and shove it down his throat until he chokes on it. That doesn’t even make the top ten on my list of payback scenarios, which he’ll learn. For now, he can enjoy believing he’s in charge.

“It seems you have been busy. I have no doubt in my Family. Perhaps you’re not familiar with such a concept...” I eye him up and down, not disguising my sneer. He flushes crimson, and for a moment, I think he’s going to grab a gun himself, but as always, he’s nothing except hot air.

“Here. Enjoy your food.” He picks up two dog bowls and slides them toward us. “I’m sure you’ll enjoy dog food—it’s fitting. You both believe you’re alphas, and yet you’re not. Oh, and Cristian? Don’t worry. You’ll be getting news soon.”

Whirling around, he stalks out of the room and the masked men follow, with one of them grabbing the cart our captor left in his hissy fit. I slide onto the floor when they’ve left, stretching my legs out in front of me as I tilt my head back against the

wall.

“Fucker needs to die.” I sigh, staring at the dog food. “I can’t wait to get home and have my chef provide a hot, quality meal. Of course, that’s if my Caro hasn’t killed him.”

Snorting, Cristian says, “I really need that story at some point. Roman constantly tells me Lio makes comments.”

“They just don’t mesh.” Shrugging my shoulders, I keep it short. It’s too much right now. I’m worried about my Boys. I do trust them to take care of things, but fuck, I need to be home.

Cristian taps his foot against the floor as he moves to sit down as well. Dropping his voice to a whisper, he asks, “What did it say?”

It’s happened enough times now that we don’t even have to fucking specify. “Cops raided my fucking house. And the whorehouse. They picked up Antonio, although they didn’t keep him. And it said someone was shot. Of fucking course the writer didn’t specify who.”

“This is bullshit.” His voice stays quiet, aware that our captor likes to listen in and share his opinions. “They’re keeping our men too busy to find us.”

Grunting, I agree as I run my fingers through my hair, not willing to admit how fucked we may be if that’s the case. “As long as your Family and mine are playing nice together, they’ll work it out.”

We both grimace at that. Our alliance was still in progress when this all went down. “Tennant...”

“Yeah, well, Emilio...”

“As long as they don’t kill each other, it’ll be fine.” Cristian doesn’t seem convinced, and neither am I. He laughs softly and I gesture for him to enlighten me, because fuck, none of this is funny. “I was thinking more about how your Boys are probably holding orgies, and being thankful my family is all paired off. Fuck knows we’d be screwed if they started having relationships between each other.”

“Christ. Thank fuck that’s not a possibility. I’m not sure what would have scared me more, them killing each other or fucking each other. Either way, it wouldn’t end well.”

“All we can do is wait. They’ll figure this out.” Cristian’s voice doesn’t waver, and I’m bolstered by it, because he’s fucking right.

“And I’m going to have fucking words with them about how long it took.” This time we both laugh. They will find us, and when we’re back? We’ll help raze this fucking place.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

“F uck.” Reaching for my tablet, I send everything I’ve uncovered to it and push away from the desk.

“What’s wrong?” Leandro asks almost absently, as the tiny human in his brain clues him into the fact he should react to my outburst.

“I’ve finally found out why the gang betrayed us,” I reply. “I need to go see Roman.”

That gets his attention. “Does that even matter anymore? They’re dead as soon as Ten gets his hands on them, so why does the reason matter?”

“Knowing what they’re thinking will only help us eradicate them. It’s best to know if everyone was on board with the betrayal, or if they’re just following orders. Come with me, learn something.”

“I have work to do.” He gestures to his monitor.

“So do I. This is part of it. Come, it wasn’t a suggestion.”

He sighs, but pushes away from his desk. With a click of his fingers, Boston crawls from beneath the desk and stretches. She licks Leandro’s arm when she’s done, and while he makes a face, he ends up scratching her head anyway. I’m pretty sure she’s the only one he is genuinely affectionate with, and if I wasn’t sure it’d get me shot, I’d comment on how adorable it is.

Ignoring the urge to tease Leandro for showing some sign of being an actual person, I lead the way out of our office and head over to Roman’s.

When we enter, Roman looks at both of us with concern. “Is something wrong?” He stands from his chair and sets his palms flat on the desk.

“Yes and no.” I shut the door firmly behind Leandro. “I found out why we were betrayed by the Jamaicans.”

Leandro wheels himself over to the desk, stopping near the guest chairs, while Boston abandons her handler and makes her way over to her favorite person.

Roman keeps his attention on the dog, even as he says, “Let’s hear it.”

“Omar Campbell’s wife and sister were both arrested for trafficking about a month before the Bosses were taken,” I say, not bothering to hide the disdain in my voice.

Roman looks up, anger etched across his features. “What I want to know is,” he says carefully. “How far in advance was this all planned out?”

“Me too, and I promise, Amore, I will find out. In the meantime, let me tell you that this information wasn’t easy to come by. They tried their best to bury all of the records, but I was able to find them after some digging. It took more time than I wanted, but those bastards aren’t as clever as they think they are.

“Anyway. The two women were arrested for drug trafficking, and I managed to uncover a deal where they spilled the beans on one of their suppliers for a lower sentence.” I grimace and hand the tablet over. “Here’s where things get interesting. There’s no record anywhere that Campbell, or any of his people, gave our name up; which makes sense since they buy weapons from us. They wouldn’t want to alert the police to that part of their business.”

Roman scans the information I gathered. “No. Everyone knows not to give more than what they’re asking for.”

“So how did they end up making a deal to sabotage us?” Leandro asks.

“That I don’t know. It’s not anywhere on record, of course. That would give the whole plan away. Especially since what they’re doing to us and the Martellis isn’t exactly legal. Whatever case they’re trying to build is paper-thin at best, which is, of course, why they took Cristian and Il Padrone before they enacted any of the plan.”

“So what, two of their people get arrested, and whoever is after us somehow found out that they buy from us, and decided to turn the gang against us?” Roman tosses my tablet onto the desk, and I wince as the impact cracks the screen.

“That’s the assumption I’m working off of, yes.”

“I was going to give them the benefit of the doubt,” Roman says carefully. “After all, we know Campbell was in the loop since it’s his gang, and he hung around when Ten got arrested, along with a few of his most trusted. But surely not everyone was in on the setup. This,” he gestures to the tablet, “just signed everyone’s death warrant. Campbell is Tennant’s, but everyone else? It’s open season.”

Before I can respond, an alarm starts blaring from the tablet, and both mine and Leandro’s phones.

Cursing, I snatch the tablet off the desk, and quickly read over the information. A sick, sour knot forms in my stomach, even as I race to the corner of the office where my computer is.

“What the fuck is that?” Roman barks.

I don’t answer, too busy pulling my phone out and calling Tennant, even as I pull up the feed I need. I’m distantly aware of Leandro calling Boston back to him as he spins his chair around and heads towards the office door.

When Ten answers the phone, I don't give him time to say a word before I order, "Get to the De Luca house, now! I'm already calling reinforcements in."

He curses. "What's the situation?"

I swallow and glance at Roman, who's looking at me with a mixture of confusion and fear. "Attack in progress. It's...not good for us."

"On my way." Tennant hangs up, but the relief of knowing he'll get the problem in hand doesn't come.

"Carter?" Roman asks, his voice hard.

I shake my head, my hands flying over the keys as I bring up as many screens as I can with only one monitor. "For now, he's safe. It looks like he was in Georgio's office. But the enemy used two different entry points: the front door and through the kitchen. There are more of them than us."

Roman curses and starts pacing. Pulling a drawer open, I fish around for one of the earpieces I left in there. No sooner have I connected it to my phone, do I get a call from Leandro.

"Did you find out who this is yet?" I ask, as I send coordinating texts to Tennant and the others en-route.

"Cursory glance at the message boards don't point to any new threats," he replies.

"Well, that's something at least."

"However, look who just walked in the front door."

“Fuck!” Omar Campbell’s Second in Command strides through De Luca’s blown open door as if it’s just another day on the job, and this isn’t the second move they’ve made against us.

“We know who’s pulling the strings,” Leandro says.

My reply is lost in the midst of an explosion coming from the kitchen. I watch in horror as fire ignites the back half of the house.

On screen, I can see Carter reorienting himself in the hall just outside of De Luca’s office. I wish I could get him on the line and berate him for being a fucking idiot, but he doesn’t need the distraction right now. Especially as Roman moves behind me to watch the screens.

“Do you think the fucker has more on them than just getting the wife and sister off scot-free?” Leandro asks.

“Maybe,” I muse. I bring up more camera feeds on my tablet, leaning it against the bottom of my monitor, wishing I was in my office so I could have access to my full set up. But my first instinct when shit went down was to get in front of the nearest computer, so needs must. Thankfully, I have Leandro to help keep an eye on things.

Another explosion rocks the house, and we lose the camera feed to one wing entirely.

“What the fuck is he doing?” Roman cries out as we watch Carter lead the way into the foyer, with De Luca following, where a handful of our men are battling it out with Campbell’s.

“He’s an Amato,” I say absently. “None of you fuckers know how to stay behind when shit goes down.”

I fire off another message to Ten with an update, urging him and his reinforcements to exercise caution. I get a sarcastic reply, but refuse to apologize for being more cautious in this situation. Too much has happened recently for me to feel comfortable with Tennant and Jude being out in the field right now.

Especially since we know that the bastard who is after us has far more reach than we first assumed.

Roman cries out, bringing my attention back to the screen in time to see a bullet graze Carter. Before I can assure my lover that it's fine, that a graze is better than a bullet to the head, Carter runs out of ammunition, and someone throws an explosive into the fray.

The last thing we see before the feed cuts out is Carter Amato collapsing.

"I've got this," Leandro says in my ear. "I need to call Ten, you take care of Roman."

I don't bother responding. I rip the earpiece off and toss it, whether it lands on the desk or not, I don't know or care.

What I do care about is catching Roman as he collapses to the floor. My chair hits the wall as I shove it away from me and go to my knees, catching the boy before he cracks his head on the hardwood flooring.

He clings to me, but doesn't say anything, though I can feel his entire body shaking, and a keening sound escapes from his throat.

"Shhh," I soothe. "It'll be okay, Amore." Shifting off my knees, I sit on the floor and gather Roman into my lap. "We don't know what happened. I refuse to believe he's dead." I hold Roman tight enough to leave bruises. "All the shit he's survived, this is not how it ends for him. Okay?"

My poor young love doesn't say anything, he doesn't even cry, but he trembles so hard I have to hold on tight so he doesn't fall off my lap.

"They're both going to come back to you, Roman," I tell him.

"Y—you can't promise that," he says brokenly.

Grabbing the back of his head by the hair, I pull his face up to mine. "No," I admit. "I can't. But I can promise you that I'm here. We're all here for you, Roman. Non sei solo. You don't have to do this alone. We will end this. No matter what happens, we'll take out those responsible."

Dark green eyes meet mine, and the empty look in them is concerning, but what scares me most is that there's not a single tear in them. Roman wears his heart on his sleeve, it's part of what makes him such a good Boss. He brings a human aspect to the position. But this is far from the reaction I would have expected from him, after watching one of his fathers get injured with no immediate word on his well-being.

"Burn them to the ground," he says. "I want their entire world to implode like mine just did. Leave nothing but ash behind."

"We will."

I press a hard kiss to his mouth, sealing my promise. Roman barely reciprocates, and my worry goes up a notch.

I need to get up, to check on what's happening, to make sure Carter's still alive, but the broken, still-vacant look in Roman's eyes says he needs me more than anyone else right now.

More than that, he needs his dads. Anything less than getting them both back to him

will break the boy beyond repair, of that, I have no doubt.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

The text comes up on my phone and chills me to the bone. I'm sitting in Lio's office and I can't find any words to speak. The entire environment chokes me, but this changes things, and I know I'll need to address him. Fucking hell.

"Lio..." I hesitate when he turns those steely eyes on me.

Sneering, he corrects me. "You mean Boss, right? After all, I'm in charge."

I close my eyes, wishing I was far away from this, or that I could fix it. Since there's nothing I can do about it, we just have to keep moving on. Things are too serious right now. It's why everyone except Antonio and Ignacio are at the mansion—which has been checked for any electronic recording devices that the police might have left.

"Very well, Boss. We have an issue. Carter is in danger. It looks bad."

Lio gives me a blank stare, as if this doesn't matter to him at all. Pinching the bridge of my nose, I try to figure out how to say something that will work. Finally, I blow out a breath, laying down everything I can.

"Look, I know you're furious with me—and with the Amatos—but we need to find Il Padrone, and working with them is the best way to do that. You know that's why there's a fucking alliance to begin with. Both the bosses agreed. So I need you to get your head out of your ass, be my logical best friend, and shove everything else aside right now."

Grinding his teeth, he doesn't say a word. For a moment, I don't think I've made any progress, until he suddenly picks up a glass paperweight and whips it toward the

opposite wall. It shatters like my heart does, pieces flying everywhere, reminding me of what it was like to be whole with him—my other half.

Fuck . The pain of leaving Ignacio has nothing on this. The way he raises his eyes to meet mine, hatred spewing out of them kills me. I swallow the pain and suffering, knowing it's him who is truly burning.

Pushing away from the desk, he snarls before picking up the phone. "Sarah, get here now. We're leaving for the Amatos and I need you with me."

When he hangs up, I interject, "Uh, I want to remind you that they have their own doctor. If Carter is alive, they're going to want him."

Snorting, he heads toward the door. "It's not for that. It's in case I kill any of the Amatos. She can bring them back to life."

He paces by the front door as Dr. Ranlen rushes toward us, her heels tapping so quickly along the hallway, it's almost continuous. She's not out of breath when she reaches us, and as she assesses my best friend—at least, I hope he's still my best friend—she breathes a sigh of relief. I don't know what she's looking for, but she must see something I can't.

Lio rushes us out, but is stopped by Marcus, who decides to grab a ride with us. Growling, Lio snaps, "What the fuck are you doing? You weren't invited, and I don't need the Amatos stealing another Martelli."

"Well, Boss, I thought you might want some updates, and this would be the quickest way to do it, since we're headed that way. Of course, if you want me to get back out again, we haven't left yet..."

Tugging his hair violently, Lio gives up. Letting go of his now roughed up locks, he

bangs against the partition, instructing the driver to head toward the Amato mansion. My skin itches to be there, even if those I want may not be there.

“Alright. Both of you, I want information. Marcus, you’re up first.”

“I talked to the gang. They’re willing to provide security while this shit is going down. They wanted free product in exchange, but I talked them into fifteen percent off for six months, unless it needs to be negotiated after that, and it’s contingent on your approval.”

Humming, Lio nods. “Agreed. That’s not too bad. Especially if it gets the LEOs off our ass long enough for us to focus on finding Master—and Cristian, of course.”

“They said they likely wouldn’t be able to find Il Padrone. However, they’ll put their tracker on gathering as much information as possible. She’s going to coordinate with Ignacio, and hopefully Antonio, when he is available.

“Ignacio had a couple of ideas. Some are...extreme. However, he thinks he’s found a few people who will take the fall for certain ideas. It may not be their own choice, but...well, I’ll leave it to him. There certainly will be chaos.” Frowning, Marcus taps his fingers on his leg. “Hopefully, Antonio will be available soon. I think he’ll be the best person to work with the tracker. Ignacio isn’t as...controllable.”

Rolling his eyes, Lio doesn’t comment, but Sarah interjects. “I think this is where I add some information. Nicolo will make it. He’s not out of surgery yet, but I’ve been reading the progress notes. While it didn’t look good originally, he has the best surgeon we have on staff. If he didn’t, I would be at the hospital now.”

“At least there’s some good news,” Lio mutters. “Benjamin, once we get the official notice that Nicolo is out of surgery, I want you to send a text to Antonio and get him to start taking care of what needs to be done. And no, I don’t give a fuck if he doesn’t

want to leave his lover. As long as Nicolo is not at risk of dying, he needs to be working. If we don't get this shit figured out, everyone's life is at risk—including his other lover's."

I purse my lips, not wanting to agree, but fuck, he's right. We need all hands on deck for this shit. I nod, agreeing to wait for the go-ahead from Sarah before I deal with an enraged Antonio.

"Speaking of Antonio, he did give us a name to check out. A fed. He thinks that while the guy isn't in charge, he's up there. Benjamin, why don't you ask your new best friends to look it over when we get there? I'll send you the information."

I bite my tongue against Lio's sarcasm. Lashing out will do no good. I fucking miss Il Padrone. Not only would he keep Lio in line, but at least when he punishes us, it's with instruments, not this—the constant freezing out, the cutting comments, and the crushing of what we had. And since we're in emergency mode, I can't say shit. Afterwards? Well, once Il Padrone comes back and gets my friend under control, we'll have a conversation about this—a really fucking loud conversation.

"Alright, I'm up. I don't know much. Leandro sent me a text, saying shit was going down with the Amatos, and that Carter was in danger."

"And we're dropping everything to rush to their aid because...?" Lio blinks at me, as if I haven't already answered this fucking question.

Gritting my teeth, I slowly say, "As I said earlier, they're our allies. Yes, we've got our own shit to manage, but everything is in progress. You need to show up for your counterpart."

"So this isn't because you're wanting another hit of your addiction?" His scorching glare hits me and I'm not impervious to it.

Fuck, what does he want me to do? Marcus's pitying look makes it clear that my best friend would like me to burn to ashes, to die a thousand deaths. And hell, I'd even consider it, if it wasn't for him being a jackass. Yes, we promised each other forever, but damn it, he needs to understand my feelings. He'd do the same for his Master. I clench my hands into fists, trying to keep everything in.

"I'm sure he's not even there, but Roman is. And if there's something we can do to help, then we need to do it. They would do the same for us."

With a short, disgusted laugh, Lio stretches out his legs. "You fucking jackass. They'd simply come, grab you, and let the rest of us die. But sure, whatever. Let's just get there, I want this shit done. We'll go, figure out what we can do to help, and then get back to our own shit. Oh, and Benjamin? Don't even think about staying. If you do, you won't like the consequences..."

The temperature in the air plummets to where I almost feel ice on my skin. Both Marcus and Sarah carefully keep their eyes averted, but Lio does not. He's waiting for my response, and I don't know what to say. Do I promise my Boss I'll listen to his edict? Or do I admit that if Tennant asks me to stay, I'm not sure which I'd choose?

Lio shakes his head, slumping against the seat. We've known each other for too long, he can read it on my face. As we slow to a stop, Marcus springs out of the limo first to let us out, muttering about wanting to live as I follow him. I'm sure it's directed at me, but fuck if I give a shit at this point.

Dr. Ranlen manages to exit the limo as if she's a queen, all grace. But Lio? When he exits, that coldness lingers. I've never seen him so locked down, and I want to say something, but what do I say to someone I know I'm hurting? I can't take it back. I can't fucking change it, and I don't want to, so I stand still, knowing I'm responsible for his misery.

I bow my head for a moment, taking the time to breathe, before following Lio and Sarah. Marcus disappeared back into the limo, most likely to wait for a ride home. Lucky fucker .

We're led to where Roman is, and while I'm not a fan of his, my heart goes out to him. The pain radiates off him like visible waves. Lio gives a quiet sigh before moving forward and embracing his friend. Hollis shifts to the side and catches my eye. I don't know what his expression says, but fuck if I care right now. I never expected my best friend to reach out to someone else when he won't even accept me.

We stand there in a frozen tableau until a beep comes through. I hope to fuck it's good news. I can't tell from Roman's expression, and that pisses me off.

"We'll get whoever is doing this," Lio says fiercely. "Whatever is going on, they can't fight the two of us. I'm here. Always."

Always . It pierces my heart hearing him say that to Roman. That was me once upon a time. He may hate the Amatos, but he's forgiven Roman. Why won't he forgive me?

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

“ I ’m here. Always.” Lio’s words break the dam, and all the emotions I’ve been holding back—not only since the news of Carter, but the start of all this—come rushing forward.

Lio holds me through my emotional plight, though his arms are stiff, and I can feel his uncomfortableness. I appreciate the gesture, more than he’ll ever know.

Normally, I’d curl up in my childhood bed with Leandro and Boston, but my best friend is needed elsewhere, and while getting information on Carter is more important, that doesn’t mean I’m not floundering without that anchor.

Hollis has been doing his best, but...it’s not the same. It's not what I need from him. Having Lio here helps. When the initial onslaught of emotions ends, I pull away from the hug, though I put my hands on his shoulders, forcing his emerald eyes to meet mine.

“Thank you,” I say in a rough voice.

“It’s what friends are for. That, and to take down your enemies with you.”

I give a watery laugh at the sadistic grin on his face as he says that. “I don’t know if I can do this...” I whisper.

Lio covers my wrists with his hands, squeezing tight enough for the bones to grind together, but the emotional numbness I'm still experiencing helps me ignore the pain.

“You can ,” he says fiercely, his eyes hard. “You are Roman Amato, and you're better

than some asshole wanna-be bad guy who thinks they can take us on. We will find Il Padrone and Cristian, and we will show everyone who thinks they can fuck with us why that is a very bad idea.

“We are Amato and Martelli, and we rule for a reason. We'll burn every corner of the fucking world down together if it means reclaiming what's ours.”

Swallowing down another bout of emotion, I nod. “Sì. Si pentiranno di averci considerato deboli. Insegneremo loro la vera sofferenza. We'll burn down the world together.”

“We will.” He lets go of my wrists and they begin throbbing with pain. I'm for sure going to have bruises, but it's worth it.

Having Lio here is grounding in a way I didn't expect. I knew we were friends, and the thought of losing him was shattering, but this... connecting through the pain and suffering we're both experiencing, it is never how I wanted to, but I know from experience that the bonds we're forging will last a lifetime.

Hollis cuts in, breaking Lio and I further apart. I can tell in his voice that he regrets interrupting, but this situation is bigger than any of us individually, so I stamp down the irritation.

“Tennant and Jude are on their way back. They'll give a full report once they're home. But...there's nothing to salvage at De Luca's.”

I can't keep my voice from shaking as I say, “Carter?”

“Doc has him. He's alive, and unconscious, but for now, he doesn't think there should be any serious complications. He'll have a better understanding once he's here, though.”

“Dr. Ranlen is at your disposal as well,” Lio tells me.

“Thank you.” I look to the doctor, who's done her best to be unobtrusive. “I'll have you escorted to Doc's office. His medical staff will be prepping the room for his arrival.” I hesitate for a moment before adding, “I'm sure you're good at your job, but Doc is very...territorial. So please, don't be offended if he is resistant to help. You're welcome as a guest here.”

The doctor gives a bland smile, though I can see amusement in her eyes. “I'm used to arrogant men trying to tell me how to do my job. Don't worry, I'm sure we'll get along just fine.”

Sighing internally, I decide to let it go. I have too many other things to worry about than that headache.

“What's Doc's ETA?” I ask.

As I glance over at Hollis, noting how Benjamin seems to have sequestered himself to Hollis's corner, and how he seems to barely be able to look in mine and Lio's direction. Which is weird. Normally, he's glaring daggers at me whenever I'm in Lio's vicinity.

I can only assume that whatever issues cropped up between them, after Benjamin threw himself at Ten, are still lingering. Whatever. So long as it doesn't affect our ultimate goal—rescuing Dad and Il Padrone—I don't really care what Lio does with his Second.

Neither Benjamin nor Tennant are my favorite people right now. Both of them fucked up and almost cost us not only our allies, but our friends. That's something I can't forget quickly.

“Ten minutes, maybe less depending on how many traffic laws James decides to break. I sent a map of where all of the current patrols are to Kail, so they can use that to keep under the radar.”

“Maybe we should buy Doc that ambulance he wants,” I muse.

Hollis snorts. “Don't encourage him.”

“Do you have any idea who attacked you?” Benjamin asks.

“The same fuckers who sold us out and got Tennant arrested,” I say darkly, watching as the Second's expression changes from dejected, almost sad, to angry at my words.

“Do you have a plan to deal with them?” Lio asks, bringing my attention back to him.

I smile, a true grin as giddiness rises up in me. “We're going to take everything they hold dear from them, and then...maybe we'll burn them alive.”

Lio's answering feral grin has my blood heating in anticipation of all the fun my friend and I are going to have.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

I suppress my gleeful need to hum as I splash more gasoline around the house. It's dark and silent outside. I've already cut the security system off so nobody can stop me. Tonight's been very effective. This is the fifth house, and probably the last for the night, sadly.

I've worked with everything from making fires look like they're faulty wiring, to incendiary devices, to accelerants. Honestly, accelerants are my preference. It can't be blamed on anything other than what it is—arson and chaos. And tonight? Five cops will get to know the joy of chaos.

The firefighter sirens are already going, which means it's less likely that this one will be saved. At least I made sure to set the fire in a way to give the kids a chance to get out. The father? He may not find his way out. Then again, a dirty cop that bit the hand that was feeding him should have been more careful.

Halfway to the sidewalk, I turn to look at my work, enjoying the smoky smell. But then, the night air doesn't seem quite...right. Grabbing my knife, I whirl around, ready to attack whoever dares to intrude on my fun.

"It's just me," a soft, feminine voice calls out, and I grunt in recognition. "I hear you've got some tracking to do."

Nodding despite the darkness, I move toward the voice, wanting to get out of here quickly. "Good to see you, but let's get out of here."

Her inelegant snort almost makes me chuckle as I weave after her. "I found your car and had my men drop me off."

I grunt in an affirmative as we cut across suburbia hell. I'd ask how she found me, but as a specialized tracker, I know better than to question her. The fires, after all, were a dead giveaway. I'll stick with creating chaos, she can handle the more...nuanced job. One of us gets to have fun, the other has to rein it the fuck in.

Slipping into my car, the overhead light is enough to see her fully. It's been a long time, but this pixie of a woman often is a contradiction to others. I never understood it, but it works in her favor.

She plays up her femininity. Her sleek haircut and perfectly applied makeup is enough to tempt most. Personally? I know better than to fuck with a woman that is on the motherfucking board of a gang. And yes, that's how they refer to themselves, like some sort of business—which I guess is true. Still, if Dr. Ranlen taught me anything, you don't fuck with a woman who can wear heels while happily cutting a man.

"Ely, it's a pleasure to see you. Have you heard anything?" I pull out into the empty streets, tapping my finger on the wheel. My mind is already on my next task, and when Ely hits my arm, I know I fucked up something. "What the fuck, El?"

"You aren't paying attention. I need you to go to our southern warehouse. I have a surprise for you, based on your request." Ely bounces in her seat and I grin, knowing whatever she's got planned will be quite enlightening.

Neither of us speak on the way. There's no need, and Ely is the reserved type. It's almost restful after dealing with everything we have going on, like a psychotic Boss and my ex being our Second. That's a mind trip, but at least I'm getting to work off some of my energy with the fires. I follow her instructions and park on the east side, the one most covered by foliage.

"What do you have for me?" I ask, sliding out of the car to walk alongside her.

Managing to silently move despite those fucking heels, she lets out a quiet laugh. “An early birthday present. You can owe me. I do prefer diamonds.”

I’d laugh if I didn’t think she was fucking serious. She’s like a dragon with her damn jewelry. Hoarding is probably an understatement. Two of the gang members whisper their greetings and shove open the warehouse doors.

Stepping in, I blink against the harsh light, only to smile broadly when I see the two men tied down in front of me. “You’ve definitely earned diamonds.”

“Finally, someone recognizes my geniusness.”

“Ely, you know I recognize it on a regular fucking basis.” I shake my head when Daniel steps out of the darkness, holding out his arms for her. She skips right into them, pressing a quick kiss on her lover’s lips. A quick shaft of jealousy lances me before I push it aside violently.

“Daniel, good to see you. Thanks for rounding these men up, and for your help.” I incline my head toward the two men, but Daniel only gives me a grunt. He’s not my biggest fan, and I’d say ditto, but I know better than to piss Ely off. “They give you any problems?”

“Nah, they learned real quick that running wasn’t going to do shit.” Amusement shines in his eyes, even if it doesn’t touch the rest of him. “But let’s get this show on the road. I want to take my woman back home before dawn.”

I’m not surprised by the “oomph” that follows that statement. Ely is not the type to be called anyone’s woman. Then again, I think he does it just for foreplay.

Leaving their interesting relationship behind, I come closer to the men who are sweating under the lights. Both of them are breathing hard, their shirts soaked in fear,

and I'd be worried about them having a heart attack if they weren't so fucking young and healthy.

Dropping into an empty chair in front of them, I smile, which only freaks them out more. "Now, running away from your debts? That's just a fucking bad idea. Stealing? That's even worse. See, you managed to piss off my Family, and the lovely lady over there."

"I'm not a fucking lady," Ely mutters, but I ignore it when the men's eyes widen.

Yeah, they didn't realize I'm a Martelli. Fucking idiots.

"So the way I see it, you have a couple options here. For fucking us over, it's a death sentence. A nice, long, drawn out death. And since you got your family involved in covering for you, they get the same sentence."

"Fuck! You can't kill my mama!" The man on the right struggles against the bindings as he shouts, but I just shake my head.

"She was told what you did, and she still chose to help you hide. And you," I swing my attention over to the other man. "Your brother has a business that's actually successful. No idea how he managed it when the rest of your family is such a fuckup. I'd go to him to take what you owe, but I hear his daughter is really sick. You don't want to cause problems with her treatment, right? Healthcare in this country..."

I leave him hanging, and it's not long before he breaks. "Please, I don't want anything to happen to my niece. My brother can't afford how much I stole."

"See? Admitting things is much better than running. But I'm feeling generous, so I'll give you a job. If you don't fuck it up, you get to go back to your families, no hard feelings and your debt is wiped clean." There's a hissing noise behind me, and I

know I'm going to have to give way more than diamonds for taking away Ely's need for blood. "Of course, if you fuck it up, the consequences are on you..."

The two exchange glances, and the man on the right swallows hard before meeting my eyes directly. With a shaky voice, he asks, "What's the job?"

"Don't worry, I'm not asking you to kill anyone. Just...start a fire. Where it's at, there likely won't even be any casualties."

"A fire. That's all you want?" the other asks dubiously, knowing there has to be a catch. If only he had displayed that sort of intelligence earlier in life.

"Yep. The target is the eleventh precinct. Do that, and all your problems go away. Don't, and well, you get to be this evening's fun, and then your family will pay."

"Are you fucking serious? You want us to torch an entire precinct? The cops will come after us. There's no way we wouldn't get caught."

I sigh, glancing at my fingernails, which have soot stuck underneath them. I'm ready for my shower, but I can't until this shit is handled. "That's not my problem. You did the crime, you pay the price. You've got two options. Decide which way you want to go."

Several seconds pass with them saying nothing, before they finally break. "We'll do it."

"Excellent!" I clap my hands, startling them. "Just remember—if you try to run, there will be no other offers, and if you turn on us? I'll make my earlier promises look like child's play. You think you know what we're capable of, but I promise, it's not even close to what you're imagining."

The chair squeals as I stand up rapidly, sending it back hard across the cement floor. The way they flinch is extremely satisfying. I turn and walk over to Ely and Daniel.

Wrinkling his nose at me, Daniel says flatly, “You want us to watch them, I suppose.”

“We’d be happy to,” Ely cuts her lover off. “After all, I know Daniel appreciates our alliance, and he’d never deny me the pleasure of seeing this through.”

Proving to be a smart man, he doesn’t say anything. I tip my head toward them. “Thanks for finding those two. Let me know if there are any problems. And yes, El, you’ll get your diamonds.”

I don’t wait for a response before I leave. I know Ely will follow through, if nothing else because she’s as addicted to chaos as I am.

I roll my neck, releasing the tension as I slide into the car. I may have grabbed the one I’d been eyeing for a while. Since Il Padrone isn’t here, I don’t have to ask permission, and when he comes back? Well, our whole Family is going to face punishment for our shit, so I may as well enjoy this while I can.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

D ying would be more interesting than this. Or at least some more torture would be. Taking our fingers was the last fun thing the assholes did, and now, the throbbing pain is just irritating. What I wouldn't give for some of Doc's good drugs right about now. Or some of the Japanese whisky that Hollis got from one of his assassin friends.

Whatever would help numb the pain in both my hand and head the quickest, I'm not picky.

Toeing at the bowl of dog food that was left following our captor's very dramatic announcement...yesterday? Probably? Now that apparently they've decided to feed us lower-grade kibble stuff that Leandro wouldn't even feed to Boston, it's hard to gauge the time.

"What the hell is that?" Allesandro asks.

I smile but quietly finish singing the verse before answering. " 'Flaws'. It...was our wedding song," I say, even quieter than the whispering we've been doing. Clearing my throat, I look away from that intense blue gaze. It's the wrong shade, but no less captivating than my husband's. "After everything I put Carter through...all the pain and suffering, the scars, he was worried I would see him differently. But, Roman's musical taste isn't all bad, and it helped me show Carter I loved him for him, not just because of his pretty face." I smirk. "Though that certainly is a bonus."

Before Allesandro can respond, our cell door opens and the troop of goons enter, making me sigh. I almost want to ask Allesandro if he minds being shot, just so I can have a little fun, but with my luck, they'd kill him either on purpose or by accident, and the last thing I need is his fiancé coming after me. Though there's also a chance

Roman would kill me for his friend.

Our captor walks in, almost skipping. Allesandro and I exchange a look because someone so jovial is just...wrong. I enjoy a little torture and kidnapping as much as the next person, but I can't say it's ever made me giddy like a teenager with their first crush before.

He looks down at the untouched dog bowls and tsks. "You don't want to lose your strength, do you? I'd be very disappointed if you died because you were both stupid." He shakes his head. "Should I have them wet it a little? I'm sorry, I suppose dry food is a bit cruel without something to wash it down with. I'd be a terrible host if I let you choke on your food." His smile and tone of voice remind me of Carter's dead brother—who was completely psychotic.

What I wouldn't give to watch my Caro whip him with barbed wire before Allesandro and I take our revenge. I add that fantasy to the running list of things to possibly do once we're out of here.

"I have something for you, Cristian." The smile this time is manic, his dull brown eyes shining with delight. "It was unfair for only Il Padrone here to get news last time, so...here you go."

A newspaper gets dropped onto my lap and I fight the urge to roll my eyes. Really, this bit is getting old. He reaches for his gun when I don't immediately pick up the newspaper and I sigh, reluctantly grabbing the stupid thing.

I've barely scanned the headline: Gunfight in Quiet, Prestigious Neighborhood , when the asshole speaks. "Guess you have more enemies than you thought." He tsks again. "Not surprising, scum like you are bound to piss people off."

I don't bother responding as I'm too busy reading the front-page article. I'm unable to

help the way the newspaper crinkles under my hands, though that's the only outward sign of my emotions.

When I finish reading, I rip the paper in half, tossing the pieces at his feet. "You think that scares me?" I ask, using years of training by Tennant's side to keep my voice level, while not allowing my raging emotions to bleed through.

He shrugs. "I warned you... Your precious Families are going down. Your father-in-law? There was just enough of his body left to be identified... Your husband?" He grins, transforming his bland features into something ugly. "According to my sources, they've found his blood...but not him, though it's still early in the processing; I'm sure his body will turn up soon."

With that little tidbit, he walks out, the goons following. As soon as the door shuts behind them, I snap.

Picking up one of the bowls of dog food, I toss it as hard as I can at the door, enjoying the way it bounces off the metal, the sound of it cracking, and the rain of kibble falling everywhere.

I pace around my small area, the manacle around my ankle pissing me off more than ever. Movement out of the corner of my eye catches my attention, and I watch Allesandro hold the torn paper side by side to read the stupid article.

"That dig about Carter..." he says quietly.

"It was his father's house they attacked," I growl, not bothering to lower my voice. The bastard knows what he did, so there's no point in hiding it. "It wouldn't be far-fetched to assume he was there." Lowering my voice, while being careful to not look at the camera, I explain, "They're estranged, but Carter has done an excellent job of mindfucking his father since he took control of the De Lucas from him. Georgio is

nothing but a waste of space, yet he's been useful due to his knowledge of the past and his connections.

"The De Lucas are ours, especially after we squashed their last rebellion. We don't need him anymore, but my husband is petty enough to keep Georgio alive—for now."

Curling my fingers into my palm, I relish in the sting. My skin itches for a knife slicing into it, and my husband's hard body over mine.

The want for pleasure-pain has never been so prominent, but in this moment, I want to hold on to any good thing I can—and giving myself over to Carter's blade, trusting him with the very blood in my veins, is the only thing I want right now.

"He could be bluffing." Allesandro stands and reaches out for me, stopping my pacing. The contact is a much-needed balm.

He shuffles as close to me as his chain will allow, and I meet him halfway, not wanting him to let go. He moves his hand to my shoulder, squeezing hard enough to make a lesser man wince. "Do not give them the satisfaction of thinking they have you," he whispers.

I tilt my head a little, letting a grin form on my lips. "Oh, they have me all right," I reply. "Just not in the way they think." I meet his stare head on. "Mi dispiace, my friend, but things might become a little uncomfortable here."

"What are you going to do?"

"Remind them of who I am. They want to play games? Then let's play. I learned from the best—and the best has never lost."

It was amusing at first, but now? It's personal. Maybe Tennant will get here in time to

play with me, if not, his loss. It's time to show them why we sit at the helm—it's not just because we have the biggest dicks, though that helps.

They can take all my fingers for all I care. They touched what they shouldn't have. And they will learn why that was a very bad idea.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

My shoes squeak on the laminate floor of the hospital. My skin itches being here, but it's not anywhere near close to the way my blood boils under the surface. How dare someone touch what's mine?

Following the nurse's directions—and at least the hospital still knows not to fuck with the Martellis—I make it to the waiting room. Slumped in the corner is my other lover, Nario. His shirt is still spattered with blood, and rage rushes through me. At least the fucking cops gave me a different shirt. Nario has had to sit in this fucking waiting room with the blood of his twin splashed on him. They. Will. Pay.

Stepping toward him, I take a seat and lean against him. It doesn't take more than a beat before I have an arm full of a distraught lover, brother, man. “What the fuck were they thinking?”

“I'm not sure, but they won't get away with it. They're already running scared because they know they fucked up. But don't worry, we'll get our pound of flesh—and more,” I whisper into his hair.

They may look identical, but there is so much more to them than their appearance. I've trained them to take over my position as Ghost when needed, as my scarring is too obvious at times. They both excel at it, but where Nario is naturally quiet, Nicolo isn't. Nicolo is often the one who speaks for both of them, except for when it comes to me. I've never made the mistake of overlooking them, and not only because Il Padrone asked me to keep an eye on them.

No, there's a magnetic pull to them. Their ability to be bloodthirsty, both in and out of the bedroom, makes them the perfect match for me.

Nario pulls back, studying me. “They didn’t hold you. We knew they couldn’t, but it’s fucking weird they’re even targeting us. The governor isn’t going to be happy about this shit.”

“No, he isn’t. Did you want to call him?” I laugh lightly, knowing the governor, who ran on a very conservative platform, would not be happy to have his extracurricular activities be made public. And Nario made sure to take plenty of pictures.

Getting comfortable against me again, Nario shakes his head. “Nah. When Nicolo is back on his feet, I’ll happily leave it to him. He should get the first chance at revenge.”

I pull at my lover’s hair, forcing him to stare up at me. “That’s not how we work. We all get revenge. But if you want him to have this one, I’ll let you. Any idea how long the surgery will take?”

“They never say, but the last time a nurse came by, she said it shouldn’t be too long before the doctor comes out. I got Dr. Ranlen’s text that things are actually much better than they originally thought.” He lets out a pent-up breath, and I rub his shoulders.

Sitting in silence, I watch the clock turn, the simple tick-tock pissing me off as it goes too slow. I need fucking answers. My phone dings and I growl as I pull away from Nario to answer it. After I’m finished, I give Nario a brief summary.

“Well, it appears the Boss is finding his stride,” I muse. “I can stay to check on Nicolo, but then I need to go. It’s time to finish this shit. Will you be alright alone? I can have one of the girls come.”

Before he can say anything, a doctor strides in, his frown setting me on edge. Glancing up from his tablet, he asks, “Nicolo Martelli’s family?”

We nod, standing up to follow him. I reach out for Nario and squeeze his hand before we disappear into the private room that the doctor leads us to. Sitting down across from him, I roll my shoulders, trying to reduce the tension I'm carrying. "Is he alright?"

"Nicolo came out of the surgery fine. He's got a long road to recovery, as a gunshot is never easy. I'll recommend a physical therapist, but he got lucky. It was a through and through, and didn't hit anything vital. Still, he'll need rest, and to slowly resume activities when he's ready. He'll be weak on that left side, but that's for a physical therapist to work on with him. I don't see any reason why he won't fully recover."

Sighing, I slump against Nario. "That's great news. Can we see him?"

The doctor hesitates, before taking off his glasses and pinching the bridge of his nose. "Look, I'm not going to get into your situation. The Martellis have been wonderful supporters of this hospital, and Dr. Ranlen speaks highly of you. However, I must insist that you follow visiting hours. Yes, you can see him briefly when he's situated, but he needs rest. That's the best thing for him. And while you could go over my head, I would greatly appreciate it if you listened to my advice."

Humming, I cock my head at him. It takes a certain bravery to speak against us, even if it's couched in compliments. "I know some people stay overnight with their loved ones. Is there any reason Nario can't stay with his brother?"

Eyeing me sideways, the doctor clears his throat. "To be blunt? Yes. I don't need any cops coming and interrupting Nicolo's sleep—or anyone else's."

I haven't had a reason to smile, but damn if he doesn't cause me to grin. "Doctor, I like you. You're honest, and say what you mean. However, don't take this the wrong way, but if Nario wants to stay, he'll stay. Don't worry about the cops, they won't be coming here. They've already apologized for the inconvenience they caused us."

The doctor—and I wish now I had listened more closely to his name—nods sharply. “Very well. Just be respectful to the others on the floor, and again, Nicolo needs rest. I’ll have the nurses let you know when you can see him.”

With that sharp rebuke, he’s off again and we’re left waiting. It’s another half an hour before a nurse comes to take us back.

Stepping into his room, my heart sinks. Nicolo is still asleep, like the nurse warned. I know the doctor is right, that he needs to rest, but I wish he was awake. I want to tell him thank you for stepping in front of me. I want to promise him that there will be blood spilled in retaliation. But I don’t need to say a word when Nario steps up to me and slips his arms around my waist.

“He’ll understand, and if he had to make the decision again, he would do the same thing. I know I would have as well. But you need to go now. You’ve got a list of things to do. I’ll be here watching over him. Nobody will get past me, not even an overprotective doctor.”

I duck my head and kiss Nario on the lips, before brushing a kiss onto Nicolo’s forehead. It kills me to walk away, but Nario is right. And so is Lio. Things can’t keep going on like this. We can’t remain on the defensive.

When I step out into the cool night air, I take a deep breath before sliding into the limo that’s waiting. I give directions based on the information I had our men pull up. Stripping in the back, I quickly pull on the nondescript clothing I keep stashed in here. When it’s time to be a Ghost, I know exactly what I need to do. People think wearing black will help them to blend, especially at night. I’ve never heard of anything so dumb. If I’m going to be around other people, the last thing I want is to stand out by wearing something that may as well say, “Here’s your friendly neighborhood thief”.

When the limo pulls over, I exit and quietly slip into my own car. One of the girls left it for me, and I smile as I get situated behind the wheel, before patting it.

Il Padrone used to hate it being in his garage, even if he understood the necessity of having a plain, nothing special car. Now that I'm in charge of the warehouse, I think he's relieved to have it away from his precious collectibles. Give me a choice between Keegan's muscle car, Il Padrone's one-of-a-kind vehicles, and the numerous limos and SUVs...I'll take my baby any day of the week.

Whistling softly, I head toward the first of my jobs tonight. It's not a long drive, and I make sure to park in a shady spot where the lights are already off. Putting my headphones on, so I can pretend I'm taking an evening stroll at this late hour, I head toward my target.

It's a bland house; beige and one story. It's probably considered ranch-style, with some vaulted ceilings, but it's showing its age. It has to be in the late 70s, maybe early 80s. I'd expect an alphabet boy to be doing at least a little better than this. Then again, I have a feeling this isn't his permanent abode.

Checking all of the security points, I'm surprised to find an easy in. Who the fuck leaves a window slightly ajar? Does he think, just because he's a fed, and it's a safe area, that nobody would dare to break in? Fucking idiot of the year here.

There's no movement anywhere in the house, and thanks to the fucking garage, I can't tell with one glance if he's here or not. Shrugging, I walk around the house unhurriedly. Nothing to see here, folks. I'm not even doing anything stealthy. People easily look away when you act like you should be there.

I carefully open the window fully and slide inside, listening for any movement or sound. There's nothing. I'm in some type of office, but it's almost completely blank. Taking out a pen light, I start to quietly go through the desk drawers, while keeping

an eye on the door. Too bad people don't keep a file saying "Evil Plans Here!". I wish I could grab his laptop, but I'm trying to hide that I've been here.

I take some quick pictures of what I find in the drawers, so I can analyze it later, but it's almost like this is a dummy office. As if someone threw things into a house to make it appear like it's a normal situation, which has me even more curious.

Walking through the rest of the house, I note there's not one single picture of anyone on the walls. No friends, no family. Hell, there's not even a fucking figurine or any other type of knick-knack anywhere.

Once I get to the kitchen, I search quickly, but don't expect to find anything. It seems I was fucking wrong. Maybe the alphabet boy was a little bit smarter than he looked. Hiding it in the kitchen rather than the office would have been a good move, if I wasn't so thorough or if he hadn't gone for the fucking cookie jar. He should be ashamed of being that stereotypical.

Pulling out the thick folder, I flip the front cover open. There are so many pages. I'm not even a quarter of the way through when I hear the motherfucking garage door start to open. I take a split second to determine whether it's worth him finding out someone was in the house by taking it, or to come back later.

Mouthing a curse word, I decide he may as well find out that someone invaded his precious sanctuary, not that I believe for a second that it's anything more than a fucking stage while he's in town. I quietly escape out of the house, leaving the window partially ajar, just like I found it. I wait until a light is turned on at the opposite side of the house, before rolling the papers up and sliding them into my cargos.

With my headphones in place again, I walk to my car, wishing I could stop and look through what I found. Instead, I don't waste a moment before pulling out onto the

street and passing the house. I'll just have shut my avid curiosity down until I've finished the next job.

That one is at least a bit easier. In fact, it's a little too easy. It's probably because Chaos is having fun that the man is up and pacing. I notice there are two shadows and I shrug, because the trunk easily fits two.

Moving my car to the front of the house for easy access, I walk right in, and I'm greeted by Sargeant Mac cursing me out—and what do you know, the man who shot Nicolo is right there too.

“Having a little party? Talking about how to cover your asses?” I smile as I pull out my gun, contemplating just putting a bullet in one of them. It'd make me feel better. Still, the Boss gave me orders, and this is serendipity. Two birds, one stone.

“You shouldn't fucking be here. You're just going to make it worse on yourself,” the sergeant snarls, but I notice Officer Dipshit has gone pale. Good. At least he knows how fucked he is.

“We can do it the easy way or the hard way. Please, do it the hard way.” I smirk as the sergeant reaches for his phone. The officer simply holds up his hands, his shoulders drooping in understanding. “Stop him if you don't want things to get worse.”

The officer takes the phone away, even as the sergeant struggles. “There's no choice here. We're dead, and we both know it.”

I chuckle darkly. I realize Officer Dipshit is hoping that by facing his death, I'll go easy on him, but he fucked up by shooting my lover. Gesturing with my gun, I tell them to get moving. It makes kidnapping so much easier when there's a nice large parcel of land with no neighbors.

I duct tape their hands and feet before roughly shoving them into the trunk. I'm almost disappointed they didn't put up a fight, but I know Lio can make it up to me. He is, after all, well versed in torture. I simply collect what we need—information or men.

I turn on some music while I drive toward the Amato mansion. I'm not sure why we're all gathered there, but I don't really give a fuck. I'm too excited about the bloodshed that's to come. I hope Lio lets me partake in this one...

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

I do one last check on Carter's bandages, then look into his hazy blue eyes. "How are you doing?"

"I feel like I got blown up, Doc," he replies.

"Technically, you did. Though all you bastards are lucky, and apparently have nine lives, so you'll be fine."

He huffs, but we both know it's the truth. Some second-degree burns along his right shoulder and arm, but nothing like he would have sustained had he not been pulled out of the way. He also fractured his wrist, whether from falling after being hit in the head by the collapsing ceiling, or from pieces of the ceiling landing on him, I'm not sure. The most concerning injury was the head wound he sustained from the falling debris, but after cleaning it up, we've determined it's not as bad as it looked—head wounds always bleed like a bitch.

"I'll give you something for the pain, then let you rest."

"Roman?"

I grimace. "Soren said he's waiting out in the hall. Want me to get him?"

"Please." He tries to shift on the bed and ends up wincing. "I need to see him."

"Don't fucking move," I order. Reaching off to the side, I grab the syringe with the pain meds and push it through his IV. "I'll let him in, but you're to rest, understand? Your job isn't to comfort him—he has enough lovers for that. I'm leaving Kail in

here to monitor you for a bit. Try not to strain yourself. Your concussion is mild, but your entire body's been through a traumatic event."

I get a lazy smile. "I'll be on my best behavior, Doc."

Rolling my eyes—as if I'll believe that—I step back from the bed and remove my gloves. "Sure you will."

Looking over my shoulder at Soren, I ask, "You already give them the spiel?"

He nods. "I don't know how much attention Roman paid after I outlined his injuries, but I did my job."

"Good." My attention shifts to the woman who's been observing us and offering not-so-quiet tips. "How about you escort our guest to the sitting room, or a room where there aren't people, and I'll join you after I finish here."

"Yes, sir," Soren teases, an amused smile on his lips.

I refrain from rolling my eyes, because I don't feel like being reprimanded in front of a guest. "It should only be a few minutes, Dr. Ranlen. I want to make sure Carter is settled before leaving him."

"Take your time, I have nowhere else to be," she assures. If that's supposed to be comforting, it's not. At all.

Soren opens the office door and gestures for Dr. Ranlen to exit first, and we follow close behind. While he leads her down the hall and out of my wing of the house, I turn to the people waiting outside the office.

Roman, of course, is leaning against the wall, his dark hair going every which way,

with a distressed look on his pale face. His eyes are bloodshot, and the poor boy looks like he's aged several years in just a day. I'm not surprised to see Jude standing beside him, the taller man offering support to his lover. I am, however, shocked to see Emilio Martelli waiting with them. I thought for sure, after the last time he was here, that he'd steer clear of this office.

Though the way he glares at me says he still remembers how I didn't hesitate to kick him out of the room when he got overly annoying. I note the way he's holding Roman's hand, wondering if he volunteered to be here, or allowed himself to get dragged along. Not that it matters. No one aside from Roman is going in to see Carter right now.

"He's awake, though I don't know for how much longer. I gave him some meds to help with the pain. You can see him, but only you, and so long as you don't stress him out. Kail will be staying to monitor him, and you know he doesn't have any issues with kicking you out."

Roman rolls his eyes. "I'll be on my best behavior. Let me see my dad."

"I want you to get some rest after this, understand?" I look to Jude and Emilio. "You need rest as much as he does. I will drug you if I have to."

Roman huffs, but Jude says, "I'll make sure he goes up to bed when we're finished here. Thank you, Doc."

I choose to believe him, for now, and turn back around to head into the office. Kail has settled behind my desk, leaned back in the chair, his phone in hand. I don't buy his nonchalant act for a second. He's my Head Medical Assistant for a reason, so I know he'll keep a close eye on Roman and Carter.

"Need anything before I leave?" I ask him.

He shakes his head, his attention still on his phone. “Nope. I’ll call you if I need to, but I highly doubt I will. Donovan will be here in a few hours to take over, and Rose will grab the morning shift.” He looks up from his phone then. “Go, relax, have a drink or two. We got this.”

I huff a laugh. We both know, as much as I want—need—a drink of something right now, that won’t happen until all this shit is over, and the Family doesn’t need me on standby.

“Let me know when you leave for the day.”

“Sure,” Kail replies, focusing his attention back on his phone.

I huff at him, but he’s been with me long enough to not pay attention to me, or what he calls my dramatics . I don’t know where I’d be without him, honestly.

Yes, Soren is amazing, and has more medical training than both Kail and Rose, but Kail was my first for a reason. He’s smart, quick-witted, and doesn’t put up with my shit. I’d trust him with my Daddy’s life, and that should say everything it needs to.

I’m grateful he’s still here after all these years, especially since Rose is needed more at the clinic now, thanks to all this shit, and Donovan is unable to miss class—if we want him to become an actual licensed surgeon, he can’t be on-call like the rest of us.

Casting a glance over at Roman and Carter, I find Roman sitting at the bedside, holding Carter’s uncasted hand, quietly crying as he does so. My heart goes out to the young Boss. So much has happened in such a short period of time, and I know Roman well enough to guess at the pressure and high standards he’s held himself to this entire time.

“I’ll come back and check on you a little later,” I softly tell Carter, who responds with

an absent nod, and I leave him and Roman to it, knowing Kail will get me if needed.

Outside the office, Jude and Emilio are still holding vigil, so I say, “He’ll probably be a while. Kail will keep an eye on him, if you two want to go rest.”

I carefully eye Jude, and the way he’s leaning on his left leg, even while he’s against the wall. I don’t comment, but I make a mental note to schedule an appointment with both him and Jayden. The last thing we need is for him to fuck up all the progress he’s made with his leg and recovery because he pushed himself too hard.

“What are you doing with my doctor?” Emilio asks with a scowl.

I smile. “Just a friendly chat. We had a meeting scheduled already, but this is much better than something so formal. Don’t worry, she’ll still be in one piece when I’m finished.”

“That doesn’t bring me comfort.”

I shrug. “That’s a personal problem then.”

I don’t bother sticking around for whatever insults he has to throw my way, and walk away at his indignant huff. If I were anyone else, I’d worry about a knife in the back, but I’ll take my chances. After all, Tennant trained me, so a baby Boss doesn’t scare me.

I find Daddy and Dr. Ranlen in the informal sitting room, a tray of food, tea, and coffee on the table between them. Taking a seat on the sofa next to Daddy, I sigh and lean into him, not caring if it looks unprofessional, as I need his strength for a moment.

“Where’s James?” I ask Daddy as he hands me half a sandwich. I’d much prefer the

coffee he's doctored for me, but I know I'll never get it if I don't eat something.

“With his brothers. Joel had a meeting with Sinclair today, remember?”

“Right. Any idea how it went?”

Daddy shrugs. “He advised both Joel and Ten to lay low. Though he was able to get the charges on them both dismissed, he doesn't want to take any chances. With the search at the Martellis', he suggested they both limit their time spent here, in case someone gets the bright idea to serve a warrant and tries to start something.”

I snort. Yeah, sure. Tennant will just...not be here, should his family need him. While it's true he could stay at the condo in the city, the time the main Family has spent there has lessened recently—only Cristian and Tennant really still go there for use of the basement office. The family has pretty much outgrown the place now, though I understand the need to keep some meetings away from the main house. Especially now that the Martellis are frequent guests.

“That was pretty much my reaction when James told me. Joel will be fine. Sinclair doesn't think anything will be put into motion anytime soon. Not only is the court system slow as fuck, but with who knows how many judges in bed with our enemies, he's going to push it as far as he can.”

I nod in agreement, knowing if anyone can somehow get the justice system to bend to his will, it's Kian Sinclair.

Once I'm finished with my food, Daddy hands me my coffee and I turn to our guest, who's sitting across from us.

“You wanted this meeting,” I tell her. “I think it's only fair, ladies first.”

That earns me an amused smile. “How generous of you.” She leans back in her seat and crosses her legs. For a moment, I wonder how someone could spend so long on their feet in heels, but dismiss the thought and focus on her words instead. “Yes, I wanted to meet with you. After the state my Boss arrived home in, not too long ago, I wanted to touch base. It seems even more prudent now, as it appears people can't seem to stop blowing our Families up.”

“If you're here to bitch about the stitch job I did on your Boss, you'll be talking to yourself. I know I'm damn good at my job.”

Dr. Ranlen raises a brow. “Did I say you weren't? It was a very good stitch job—though he did end up pulling one, but that's not your fault, or a mark against you. My concern lies in if that's the type of...play your Family indulges in, I would like to get a better handle on it, and what I can expect. The bruises around my Second's throat tell a very interesting story.”

I shrug and drink my coffee, mulling over how to phrase things. I won't bullshit her—something tells me she won't tolerate that, but there's really not a clear way to explain Hollis or Tennant.

“I can see your point in wanting to know what to expect. I wish I could tell you.” I give a sardonic smile. “My life would be so much easier if the assholes told me how they planned to wreck each other during sex. Then I could prepare.” Daddy discreetly elbows me.

Dr. Ranlen laughs. “So, cutting up backs is a common occurrence?”

I shrug again. “Usually, it's more of a Carter and Cristian thing, but blood play isn't out of reach for the others. Not so deep, normally. Most of the time, they can patch themselves up. It's only when they need to make a point that things can get out of hand.”

She rolls her eyes. “Oh, joy. So I can expect more stitches, and almost choking someone to death. Because I can guarantee my family will piss yours off again at some point.”

“Essentially, yes. Hollis is very...particular about who he allows to touch what's his. And he seems to have a kinship with your Boss.”

She hums. “I know what Lio is like, and what he gets from Il Padrone. Though, I think it's safe to say, he's not the one we have to worry about right now.”

“Agreed. I might not know him, but the way he...stormed off last time he was here—and the fact he stabbed Ten—tells me he won't be open to anything Hollis might offer. Doesn't mean none of your other family members aren't, though.”

She rolls her eyes. “They have a unique way of showing they care about one another. As I'm sure you can guess.”

I snort. “That's one way to put it.” Daddy places his hand on my thigh and squeezes tightly in warning. Apparently, that was a bit too sarcastic.

If the gesture bothers Dr. Ranlen, she doesn't let on. Not that I give a shit. I'm too tired to pretend right now. I need my Daddy more than I need this woman's respect.

“I can tell you, Tennant won't almost kill anyone again.” The look she gives calls bullshit, and I grin. “If he wants to kill a Martelli, there won't be any almost about it.”

“Doc...” Daddy says my name with an exasperated sigh.

I shrug at them both. “He was...in a particular mood. I've known him half my life, and I can honestly say, I've never seen him like that. Then again, he's always had Cristian by his side. He's... I can't say he's under control, but he is mostly more

rational now.”

I get a look of disbelief from Dr. Ranlen, but there's nothing I can do about that. Ten has never hidden who or what he is. Just because he's able to leash his baser instincts, it doesn't mean they're not still there. If Benjamin Martelli wants to play the lamb to Tennant's wolf, more power to him.

“As for people blowing our Families up, or shooting them,” I say pointedly. “My clinic is open to everyone working for either Family—I trust the doctors under me; they were all handpicked. The Head Nurse there is one of my personal Medical Assistants, so rest assured, it's run well. And my office here is ready for any and all emergencies that may crop up with the main Families.”

“It's a very impressive setup, especially in the limited space.”

“Cristian has promised to do some renovations and expand the office, but thank you. I've worked hard to make sure we have everything we need on hand. The less need we have for a hospital, the better.”

“I know when to admit someone is just as good as me, or close to it,” she says delicately.

I laugh. “Then you're a better person than I am. The only surgery I didn't handle myself, in recent years, was an amputation. I'm very good at my job, but I'm not a surgeon—I just play one on TV.” I smirk and Daddy sighs again. This time his warning squeeze to my leg comes with his sharp fingernails digging in.

“Not all of us are lucky enough, or have the need for a full-time medical staff,” she says.

“That should be something you take up with your Boss, then.”

She shakes her head slightly, but the smile on her lips says she finds me amusing. “I happen to enjoy my job at the hospital.”

“You mean you like instilling fear in everyone there,” I reply.

She shrugs, and it's answer enough. “I will enjoy taking advantage of your setup, though, while we're working so closely together.”

“Enjoy away, Dr. Ranlen. My staff and my office are at your disposal.”

“Sarah, please. No need to be so formal, especially when we're going to be so close.”

“Sarah, then.” If she expects my name in return, she's shit out of luck. Taking the last sip of my cooling coffee, I say, “I don't normally drink while on-call, but a new friendship deserves to be celebrated, does it not? I know where Cristian stashes the good liquor.”

“Did I say you can have a drink?” Daddy asks.

I look at him. “Please, Daddy? Just one? In the name of friendship?”

“Why should I say yes?”

“Because you love me.” I give him my best smile. “And I've been very good recently. That deserves a reward.”

“Does it?”

“Yes.” Leaning into him, I hover my lips over his. “Whatever you want from me, Daddy.”

“I'd get that anyway, Baby.” He nips at my bottom lip. “But, fine. One drink; I'll pour.”

“Yes!” I kiss him quickly, then hop up. “I'll be right back. Go ahead and ask for some better snacks, Daddy. So we can relax and get to know our new friend.”

I don't bother waiting for a reply, practically skipping out of the room on my way to Cristian's office.

While the circumstances we're meeting under are less than ideal, I'm happy to have another doctor in my corner. Especially one who understands my unique position. If we bond over how stupid our Families can be sometimes, well, who can blame us?

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

“Thank you for letting me use your torture area.” I smile at Roman, happy to have a fucking outlet for my chaotic mind. Roman must understand because he squeezes my hand.

“Of course, Amico Mio,” he replies. The smile gracing his face is at odds with his red rimmed eyes.

Fucking hell, I can’t believe they tried to take Carter from him. I don’t want to admit it, but it worries me that they’ve sunk so low. Does it mean Master and Cristian aren’t alive? Are our assumptions wrong?

Walking in to the torture room, I let out a whistle. “Damn, this is next level. We have small rooms scattered here and there, but nothing this extensive. And we had to give up my favorite because there was a chance the cops would execute a warrant there—which they fucking did.”

“And that’s why I brought Sergeant Mac with me.” Antonio glares at our captives.

Ignacio is hanging around in the background, remaining silent as he looks us over when we arrive. He gives a nod, and he’s probably as grateful as I am that Benjamin isn’t here. Perhaps for different reasons, since if it were up to me, Benjamin would take a turn being punished. I at least wouldn’t kill him—probably. Unlike these two, who have more than forfeited their lives.

Seeing the two cops tied up in front of me makes me smile. Although I do greatly appreciate the complexity of the Amatos’ setup, I have no desire to delve into it that much. Maybe Roman will let me play later... I grab my knife, loving the fear I see in

their eyes.

“Now, let’s start with you, Sergeant Mac. You made some...interesting comments. I have to admit, they fucking pissed me off. Now, I am the forgiving sort.” Both Ignacio and Antonio make choking noises, but I flick them away. “However, you have information, and I need it. I want to know who set this up—and why.”

Sergeant Mac spits at me, and I roll my eyes. Such a childish display. “Nothing I tell you will help. We are too well organized. The only important part that you need to know is that you’ll all go down. I’ve waited my entire career to get rid of the corruption in this town.”

“Ah, I see. So, you’re going with delusional. FYI—pleading insanity doesn’t work here.” I shift my perspective to the man who shot Antonio’s lover—and was aiming for Antonio. “And you. What was your goal here? After all, shooting directly at one of us...well, that’s fucking stupid.”

He manages to pale even further, his body is shaking so much, he’s about to come out of his skin. “We were told we were going into a hostile environment, and to be ready to react with all means necessary. I thought he was going for a weapon, and the other man stepped in front of him. If I could take the bullet back, I would.”

“Jesus, Daniels. You’re a fucking disgrace to the badge. You don’t apologize to criminals, especially when you were just doing your job.”

Humming, I can’t decide which one is more of an idiot. I’m inclined to think Sergeant Mac, after all, he knew what was going on. Daniels was led like a lamb to the slaughter.

Shrugging, I cut off Sergeant Mac’s shirt, not caring that I nick him in several places. I smile as he hisses at the sharpness of my blade.

I'm ready to start playing, when Roman comes up beside me and turns his phone toward me. I scowl at the fact it's motherfucking Hollis who sent the message. I can't deny that the information isn't useful, even coming from a fucking Amato.

"Well, this makes things interesting." I tilt my head as I stare at the sergeant. "You have an ex-wife... It's not surprising she's an ex, but what does surprise me is that you have a little boy. I'm shocked she stayed with you for that long, but you can't account for taste."

"You keep your mouth shut," he growls as he fights against the ropes tying him down. It doesn't do shit, other than bite into his hands, but it's a direct hit.

"Roman, do you think I should ignore such valuable information? Don't we make sure that when people fuck with us, we take care of the problem permanently, and with severe prejudice? After all, we can't have our enemies thinking we're too soft."

"We definitely shouldn't ignore it. And since he has no information to give us, it's not like there's anything he can barter with." If Roman is trying to come off as having a serious voice, he misses it with a bit too much glee. Then again, I agree.

"You fuckers! This is why you need to be exterminated! Wiped from this city, burned to fucking ashes!"

"You really underestimate us. We're the fucking Martellis and Amatos." I may not like the Amatos much right now, but damn if I don't respect their Family.

Scowling, he slumps, but finally nods. "Fuck it. I'm going to die anyway. Just leave my kid alone. And probably the ex too. Although, really I don't care about her."

I exchange a disbelieving glance with Roman. "You...would want your child to be an orphan? You know what, I don't even want to know. Just answer the fucking

question.”

“When plans started being made...about nine months ago? Yeah, I think it was nine months, when people started getting information, instructions, plans, but I was skeptical. I don’t like following orders blindly, even if it’s to rid us of you. So, I made some inquiries. Nothing that made too many waves, or at least, so I thought. Until I was coming out of my house and got fucking kidnapped with a bag over my head.”

He manages to sneer, and I can’t wait to wipe it off his goddamn face.

“I never saw who it was. She didn’t give me her name. Just made it very clear that it was far beyond my level. Not local, hell, not even state. I’m assuming federal, but she was cagey as fuck.

“Either way, she said they had a plan, and I could get with it if I wanted you taken out, or I could look the other way. Those were the only two options. Once I knew there was someone actually pulling the strings who knew what they were doing, I was happy to help.”

“Right, because a bag over the head, and an unknown voice, absolutely screams trustworthiness. Whatever. Do you know how to contact this person? Or were you too stupid to get any information, other than ‘we’re going after the two most powerful crime families because we’re idiots’?” When he remains deadly silent, I roll my eyes at Roman and shrug, feeling disappointed. “He didn’t even let me have fun.”

“You can still torture him, Amico Mio.” Roman pats my arm sympathetically. I wrinkle my nose at it and shake my head. It’s too...boring. “Would you like me to do it?”

I consider it for a moment, mainly because Roman deserves to have some fun after what he’s been through. However, the exhaustion pulling at his features puts my

selfish desires to rest. He really needs some sleep...

With a deep sigh, I walk forward and slit the man's throat. There's no need for any long statement, just the urgency to finish this shit. I want Master back, Roman needs his father back, and we need to figure out what's going on with our families.

Stepping back, I turn to Daniels. He doesn't meet my eyes, even as resignation radiates from him. It's palpable, but I don't give a shit. I throw my knife, lodging it into his shoulder. His loud scream does perk me up a bit. Daniels lets out a high-pitched keen when I roughly yank the blade out.

"That's for Nicolo." I turn toward Antonio. "Your call on if we torture him or not. We could chop him into pieces? Burn him? Rip his nails off? What do you want?"

Antonio wrinkles his nose, and I forgot he's not a fan of torture—too messy. He doesn't give a shit about it. There's a reason he's the best dressed of all of us. "Eh, burning would make me hate bacon again. So let's not do that. Chopping...it's just so overdone. What are we? In a horror movie?"

I throw my head back and laugh at his complete tone of disgust. When I can finally speak, I manage to ask, "Then what would you prefer?"

"Is there something less...bloody?"

I pinch the bridge of my nose as Roman chokes on a laugh. It's not that Antonio won't get his hands dirty, because I've seen him pull the trigger and take people out with no problems. Still, he's not exactly giving Roman the best impression here. "Why don't I rip some of his nails off? Then you can kill him, and we can get the fuck out of here. We all need a break."

"That is a good option. Although, it's not like he actually cared about his nails. Has

he not heard about manicures? I don't even want to think about what his feet must be like."

Daniels still hasn't stopped screaming, and it's giving me a headache. I gesture to Roman. "Mind getting some pliers? You're welcome to join in as well. The sooner this is done, the sooner we can go."

"Of course."

It doesn't take long for Roman to come back with toys for us both. Neither one of us talk while we're pulling his nails off. It's a fun yet gruesome process. I personally find it relaxing. Each pop is deeply satisfying.

About halfway through, Daniels slumps down and I glance up at him. "He passed out!" shouts Roman.

The outrage in my friend's voice matches the internal fire inside me. Fuck . This day is not going how I wanted. Staring up at the ceiling, I wonder what deity I pissed off if I can't even have some fun, some bonding time with my friend. With disgust, I turn toward Antonio and gesture him forward, offering him the knife.

I walk behind Daniels and yank his head back. I know Antonio wants a clean cut, preferably one that won't cause blood to get all over his suit. It's over in less than a second, although Antonio lets out a sigh. Turns out, he still managed to get some blood on himself.

"You need to practice more," I say shortly, shrugging.

Antonio glares at me, but doesn't say a word. He just walks over to the sink to wash off. He tries to be kind and washes my knife. I bite my lip from saying anything. It's not his fault that I'm really fucking particular about how it should be cleaned.

I turn to Roman, planning to let him know we are clear to go, only to stumble back into Antonio, who catches me. What. The. Fuck? Ignacio and Roman are locked in a heated stare that's enough to set those corpses on fire.

“Uh, Boss?” Antonio questions.

“I fucking forgot Ignacio gets off on watching people get tortured.” Of course, I didn't think Roman, of all people, would be...interested.

Ignacio smirks at him, stalking forward, and I clear my throat, halting him. “Is this wise?”

Roman makes a gesture I can only interpret as “get the fuck out, I want to be sexed up”. I turn to face Antonio, planning on demanding his thoughts, but he chuckles. “You know how it is after torture. You and Il Padrone played plenty of times.”

“Fuck it,” I grumble. “We'll see you later. Don't do anything—You know what, I'm not even going there. Have fun.”

I go to storm out, but Antonio catches my arm, forcing me to walk steady. Lowering his voice, he whispers, “I know you're not happy about this, but you must recognize that Roman is a Boss as well.”

I'm not happy to admit that he's right, so I don't say anything. Instead, I let him walk us out, putting whatever shitshow is going to happen behind us. At least when we finally get out into the cool air, I can take a deep breath and let it out.

“Are you going back to see Nicolo and Nario?”

“Of course, unless you need something else?” Antonio looks at me warily. It's understandable, as I already dragged him away from his lovers once.

“No, you’re good. I’ll let you know if there are any developments.”

“I do have this for you.” He hands me some rolled up paperwork, and I gesture for him to explain, but he shrugs. “I don’t know what it is. I didn’t have time to read it. It was in the fed’s house—hidden. Since Roman is busy, maybe go over it with Ten or Hollis? They’d both be good options.”

“So would Marcus.” I frown as I start shuffling through the pages.

Antonio coughs, and I turn my attention back to him. “We’re allies. That means we don’t keep shit from each other. It means we rely on each other. I don’t know what happened, and I really, truly do not care. If you want to continue being respected, you need to put petty shit aside.”

Growling, I narrow my eyes at him. Unlike most who would back away, he doesn’t. I’m impressed, but with his background, it’s hardly a surprise. “I’ll think about it. Now, let’s get the fuck out of here. Who knows how long Ignacio will keep Roman.”

“That’s just fucking weird,” Antonio mutters, and I snort.

That feels like a fucking understatement. Of all people—Chaos. I hope my friend knows what he’s doing, because when Chaos is on point, there’s no stopping him.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

A n Amato... I wasn't expecting this. And yet, fuck, Roman calls to every inch of me. The way he reveled in the torture, his confidence when facing our enemies, and yet, there's that small, wounded prince inside him... Damn.

"You want something?" I growl as I cup the back of his head. When he nods silently, I yank his hair, forcing him to look up at me. "You have to say it. Otherwise, how do I know?"

"I want you. To use me. To destroy me." His eyes darken with lust, and I plan on giving him exactly what he wants.

He wants to be destroyed? I'll show him what it's like to be lit ablaze and feel like there's no way to survive it. He closes his eyes and I strike, biting his neck—hard.

"You will look at me. I want to make sure you see me. That you know I'm not Hollis, Tennant, or Jude. You're getting fucked by me ." I almost stutter over Tennant's name, but when Roman trembles in my arms, I can't seem to give a fuck about that wound.

He opens his eyes, showing me the desperation and fear swirling in them, before he softly responds. "And you won't see Benjamin."

"Little One, there isn't a chance in hell anyone can be with you and not see you. There's nobody else," I whisper against his lips, before pushing his jacket off and ripping his shirt from his chest, the buttons pinging over the cement floor.

His startled, outraged gasp only makes me harder, and I grind into him, drawing out a

moan. I pull his skirt down, rubbing my hand against his covered erection. He clutches at my shoulders and I give in, drawing his underwear down too.

While he works at taking the garments off completely, I quickly rid myself of my clothes, impatient to be with him, to be in him, to have everything with him. Fuck . He's so. Damn. Hot.

I spread my shirt out on the floor and gently tug him down, wanting to prevent at least some of the pain. Well, pain that's not directly caused by me. I stretch out on top of him, softly kissing his neck.

This is not what I expected. I planned on a hard, good fuck, but there's something about him...

"Jesus, fucking use me!" he snarls, digging his nails into my back.

I hiss at the sensation and twist to grab his wrists, slamming them down on the floor. "You will get exactly what I give you. If I want to fuck you hard, I will. If I want to take my time, taking you apart piece by piece, you'll take it and be grateful."

I let go of his wrists and trace his neck as he swallows hard. I briefly tighten my hands around his slender throat before letting go. The thing he doesn't realize? I won't ever fall for listening to someone else's demands again. No, this is my show, but by the time we're done? He'll be a puddle of nothing except satisfaction.

I drag myself down his body, digging my nails into his flesh as I go, watching him arch up. Smirking against his body, I press more light kisses, some open or with the occasional nip, dragging my tongue over his soft skin. The salty taste joins the scent of blood still clinging to the air, making me harder. The way he writhes underneath me is delicious, and I haven't even reached the first course.

When I breathe on his cock, it jerks, and I chuckle at his impatience. His constant curses spur me, encouraging me to take my time even more. I sink my teeth into his groin, loving the way he jerks up, screeching before it turns to a moan.

“Like that, Little One?”

“Fuck.” His voice is breathless, and joy spreads through me. This simple act of connecting is more than I’d hoped for when I got him on the ground.

I had hoped to draw this out more, but I can’t resist him. I’m powerless, and it’s an uncomfortable feeling, yet so fucking freeing, too. Thoughts fly out of my head as I take him in my mouth, swirling my tongue around the head of his cock before slowly pulling it in, inch by glorious inch. Tightening my lips and increasing the suction, I draw up and drag my tongue along the vein running underneath.

“Fucking hell, your mouth!” Roman gasps, and I’d laugh if I could, but I’m too busy savoring every damn minute of the blow job. Pushing him higher and higher, until his thighs start to shake. “Fuck! If you keep that up, I’m going to come!”

I pop off, lifting myself up so I can smile at him. “Well, we can’t have that. I haven’t even gotten to the good part yet.”

Roughly opening up his cheeks, I dive right in, tonguing his hole. There’s no gentleness this time. It’s dirty, it’s desire, and from the way his body shifts, it’s driving him crazy. Exactly what I wanted.

When he’s finally loosened up, and my tongue is gliding into him easily, I back off and suck my fingers. Once they’re wet enough, I insert two and begin to stretch him, preparing him for my cock. He starts pushing against me, fucking my fingers without a damn thought, and I wonder if I’ve seen anything hotter in a long time.

“Get in me, damn it! I’m prepared enough,” Roman grits out.

“What did I say, Little One? You get what I give you.”

He slaps his hands against the floor and I shake my head. I’m not his other partners. I’ve heard all about how he likes being used as a toy. I’m going to show him he can have that and this —what I can give him—as well.

I withdraw my fingers and spit in my hand, using it to lube my cock as much as I can. I move him so that his legs are locked on my shoulders, fully stretching him out.

As much as I want to shove right in, I make myself take it slow, if only so I can watch the frustration play over his face. Finally, when I’m all the way in, I thread my hands in his and push them down against the ground, wanting the extra connection.

I start slow, my body trembling from the urge to go faster. He whips his head from side to side, alternating between the cutest growls and desperate whimpers.

The need to go faster is soon too much for me and I pick up the pace, listening to his cries of “yes” and “fuck”. I want to close my eyes and savor the feeling, but I can’t look away from him. I thrust harder, forcing us both to reach for the wave that’s ready to crest over us.

“I want you to come on my cock. I need you to give me this.” My voice is hoarse, and I’m struggling to hold on. I’m at his mercy and he doesn’t even know it.

Suddenly, he tightens around me, cum spurting out and covering both of us. The feel of his ass clamping around me is too much, and I let my own orgasm crash over me. I’m not sure if it’ll ever stop. It consumes me, and I wonder if there will be anything except ashes left. Finally, somehow, it ends, and I slump against him, letting my body fully cover his.

With a sigh, I nuzzle his neck, licking the sweat that's pooling there. I let go of his hands and run my fingers through his hair. "I'll move, I just can't right now."

"Mmm," he murmurs, sounding fucked out, just the way I wanted. His arms wrap around me, and trace nonsense patterns against my skin.

I'm not sure how long we lay there, but when I finally get the strength to move, I roll onto the cement. The cold actually feels good on my overheated skin. The problem is... What the fuck do I do with this feeling in my chest? The heat radiates there as well. This wasn't supposed to happen. Not with anyone, and definitely not with the Boss of the Amatos.

Before I can think about it too deeply, his hand finds mine and he squeezes it. Roman doesn't say anything, but there's comfort there, and I have to wonder...am I not the only one feeling this way? Or am I setting myself up for heartbreak, once again? Too bad it's too late to go back. The only way to find out is to go forward and... shit.

This means I may have to be nice to fucking Tennant.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

“ You should go to bed, you look as exhausted as I feel,” Jude comments, laying his head on Hollis’s shoulder, but watching me.

Leaning against the desk, I cross my legs in front of me and try to smooth down the wrinkles on my shirt. “We all need sleep, though I don’t think any of us will get it until Roman returns.”

None of us are used to Roman going off on his own. Yes, he has his guards with him, but that doesn’t really mean much when shit keeps hitting the fan at every turn. At the same time, Emilio isn’t very trusting of anyone except Roman right now, so letting him take the puppy out for a little fun and stress relief wasn’t a choice.

“Roman will probably end up sleeping with Emilio anyway,” Hollis says, leaning back in his chair as he reaches up to play with Jude’s hair. “They’ve been joined at the hip since the Martellis arrived.”

I hum in agreement. “It’ll be good for them. They need time to bond, and to rest. If Emilio feels better by Roman’s side, and vice versa, we’re in no position to stop them from doing anything.”

“You think they’ll sleep together?” Jude asks.

Hollis and I exchange a look, and both shake our heads. “Hard to say,” I answer. “Roman can’t give Emilio what he needs, though he’s been down with letting Emilio fuck him since the beginning. But no, not tonight at least. They’re both too exhausted. Too much has happened in the last few days, let alone since the Bosses were taken. A night or two on their own, where they can be with someone who understands the

unique position they're in, will be good for them."

Hollis laughs and I look at him. He nods towards the monitor showing the torture chamber Emilio and Roman are using. "Well, one of them is about to get well fucked."

Turning my head, I look at what's happening on screen and roll my eyes. Chaos is very turned on by watching his Boss torture and kill, and Hollis leans forward to hit a few buttons, splitting the screen into two, so the three of us have a very clear shot of Roman giving the man his heart-eyes.

"Of all the Martellis to moon over," I say in disgust.

"Ignacio isn't so bad," Jude replies. "I'm rather impressed with everything he's done the last few days."

"So he's not completely useless as a weapon, doesn't mean he's not a shit boyfriend."

Hollis sighs. "You're going to have to figure out a way to work with him. I highly doubt Benjamin will care for your cutting remarks, whether he's broken up with him or not." I roll my eyes, but Hollis doesn't pay me any mind. "If Roman is going to be busy getting his own Martelli, I think you should go check on yours. He's been scarce since they arrived. I don't know if you've noticed, but there's a distance between him and Emilio now."

I've noticed. You can't not notice how far apart those two are. It's a stark difference from when you couldn't tell where Benjamin ended and Emilio began. Now, the emotional chasm between them is like the distance between the Earth and Sun.

"He's right," Jude says. "The last time you and Benjamin were together was, well... You almost killed him. And he said he loved you. There's a lot there to unpack

between the two of you. Us four, we're fine.

"I know I had my hang-ups at the beginning, but the more time I've had to think about it, about the outcome of that day... I understand now. You need to foster whatever those feelings are between the two of you, before they get lost under the shitstorm we're wading through. Or let him down gently, if you've already got what you wanted."

"I'm not done with him," I reply firmly. "I didn't go seeking Benjamin out, not for sex or a relationship, or anything... But I won't throw what we're building away either."

"Then tell him that. He needs someone in his corner."

"Jude's right," Hollis cuts in. "Losing Ignacio was one thing, but Emilio? That'd be like if I lost you, Ten. It's a pain I cannot fathom. So go, we'll wait for Roman to get home and either put him to bed with us, or tuck him and Emilio into his bedroom. You can spend some time with Benjamin."

Pushing away from the desk, I kiss Jude, savoring his touch and taste. "The next time we have a moment to spare, I'm going to fuck you, just like Chaos is fucking our toy right now."

His pale green eyes light up with amusement. "Promises, promises." He kisses me again, hard and fast, before gently shoving me away.

Turning to Hollis, I urge him out of his chair, ignoring the protest Jude lets out as he sits up from leaning on our lover. Holding Hollis in my arms, I hover my lips over his. "Non ti merito."

He grins, sliding his hands down my chest. "You really, really don't. But I love you

anyway. Always. Stiamo meglio insieme—that means all of us. Go make sure your boyfriend is okay.”

“Do you know where he is? As you said, he’s been making himself scarce. I haven’t seen him since Roman and Emilio decided to go on their little outing.”

“His room, I think? I know he hung out with Soren and the docs for a bit, but last I checked, he was upstairs.”

“Thank you.” I kiss him, slow and deep, and all-consuming.

Hollis holds onto me like he never wants to let go, but I know he will, so I hold him just a little tighter, because I know none of this would be possible without him. When he pulls back, he smiles, and his dark brown eyes are full of a love and affection I don’t deserve, but will never let go of.

“Thank you,” I say again, knowing he’ll understand all the things I mean by it.

“I love you, Ten. Anything I can give you, I will.”

Pressing another soft kiss to his lips, I finally let him go. For the first time, in all the years we’ve been together, I think I understand what it means when Hollis says those three words, and the feeling it gives leaves a...strange completeness behind in my chest.

Without thinking too hard about the new experience, I give them both one more kiss, and Hollis a warning to not work too hard, then leave the office.

Upstairs, I knock on the door to the guestroom that quickly became Benjamin’s. I almost want to ask Roman how he feels about moving Benjamin to the family wing of the house, but I also think it suits to have him separate from it.

He's not an Amato, though if Emilio keeps pushing him away, I'm not sure how much longer that'll be true. At the same time, he's part of us because of his connection to me. There will be time to figure it all out, this is new to all of us. Besides, with Emilio being so...anti-Amato right now, who knows if Benjamin will even get to enjoy his new bedroom for long before being dragged home again.

The thought makes me want to take the young Boss to task for being unfair to his so-called best friend's feelings, but Hollis would kill me if he knew I had that type of death wish.

The door opens to a very defeated looking Benjamin, though he perks up a little when he sees me. "Are Lio and Roman back already? Sorry, I just...I needed a minute away to think, and didn't know where else to go..."

"Hush, Topolino, you're fine. No, they're not back yet. Don't worry, they'll be in touch if we're needed. You're welcome to use this room whenever you want, though we can move you to a bigger, better one, if you want?"

"I...no. I don't want to be an imposition."

Stepping into his space, I force him to back up into the room. When we're both on the other side of the threshold, I close the door behind me, flicking the lock.

"You're not. You're mine, Benjamin. And that means you have certain rights here."

He grimaces. "But I'm not, am I?" He lifts his chin, showing off his fading bruises. "You have Roman, and Jude, and Hollis—who reminds me a little too much of Il Padrone, if I'm being honest. Though with Allesandro, at least I know where I stand."

I tilt my head as I listen to him and begin undressing, tossing my jacket and tie over the dresser, before undoing my shirt buttons. "Do you not trust when I say that if

Hollis wasn't on board, we wouldn't be here?"

"I don't share," he replies firmly.

I raise an eyebrow as I shrug out of my shirt. "I believe you shared your ex with Il Padrone, and all the other Boys. He shared you too, no? I know the Martelli ways. You share Emilio with his fiancé."

"That's different," he insists.

"Is it? Enlighten me, Topolino."

"I know where I stand with Allesandro. He allows me to have Lio because he knows Lio needs—needed me. Ignacio isn't in love with Allesandro, none of the Boys, aside from Lio, are. He saved them, shaped them, and gave them a home—a family. They're loyal to him because he made it so. What you have with Hollis and the others...I can't compete with that. I won't."

Toeing off my shoes and socks, I kick them out of the way, then shuck off my pants, folding them and placing them on top of my already folded shirt. Turning back to Benjamin, I reach for him. "You're wearing far too many clothes. Strip and I'll tell you all the reasons why you're wrong."

Grabbing my gun, and one of my knives, I carry them both to the bed while Benjamin stares at me. Setting the weapons within easy reach on the nightstand, I stretch out on the bed, leaning against the headboard.

"We need to talk, Benjamin, and I want to be comfortable doing it—so lose the clothes."

He lets out a shaky breath, but quickly undresses, taking as much care with his own

suit as I did with mine. Every inch of skin that's revealed gets my blood heated, but I stamp that down. Sex can come later, there are far more important things we need to be doing right now.

Benjamin climbs onto the bed and I pull him onto my lap, forcing him to face me. He sets one hand on my shoulder, while the other settles lower on my arm. He stares at the still-bandaged wound from where Emilio stabbed me.

"It's fine," I assure him. "It's healing. Doc says it should be good as new soon, it barely even hurts now. Though I'm supposed to see Jayden once Doc gives the okay, to make sure it's in working order."

Benjamin traces the edge of the bandage with a fingertip. "I can work with you," he says. "I should help you heal from this. After all, it's my fault you were hurt in the first place." He looks at me, his sea green eyes filled with sadness. "I'm sorry. I knew Lio was protective, I just... I didn't think..."

Setting my hands on his hips, I squeeze them gently. "It's not your fault. You're not responsible for someone else's actions. I understand. I might not appreciate getting stabbed, but he was just trying to protect you." I give a quirk of my lips. "Much like I was when I rushed in there. I didn't like how he talked to you. Has it been like that since?"

He shrugs. "He's... Lio doesn't handle emotions well, and I kind of stomped all over his. He's angry with me, and a bit...distraught. I don't know what to do. I've tried talking to him. I thought we were getting somewhere, but, well...it all went to shit so quickly. And it's been one thing after another since, so we haven't gotten a chance again."

"Do you regret it?" I reach up and trace the bruises still lining his throat.

He immediately shakes his head. “No. Not one second of it. I love you, Nocciola. There was never a doubt in me that I was doing the right thing.”

I huff a laugh at the stupid endearment. “I’m a dangerous man, Topolino. Even when I’m not running high on anger and fresh off my leash. You’ve seen Hollis’s scar.”

“It’s hard to miss such prominent teeth marks on the front of someone’s throat,” he says softly.

I trace my fingers gently down his throat, to his collarbone and below, stopping at his heart. “I did that, not because I was upset over the injustice done to either of us, but because the monster I am wanted to see him bleed. I could have—no, I wanted to kill him.”

“But you didn’t,” he points out. He moves a hand to my heart, splaying it out across my chest and pressing firmly against it, as if he can touch the muscle underneath the skin. “You love him; you wouldn’t hurt him like that.”

I give him my best grin. “I think about killing Roman every single day. One day, I might, simply because the little shit will deserve it. Emilio has a right to worry. You should be terrified of me, Benjamin.”

He leans in, mouth hovering over mine as he says, “The only thing I’m scared of is being without you. You’re mine , Tennant.”

I lean forward and kiss him, biting at his lips until I taste blood, moaning when he does the same and the blood flows between us, entwining and making us one as we share saliva and blood.

Pulling away, I grip his hair, digging my fingers into his flesh with my other hand. The cry he lets out as I mark him is beautiful, and my cock hardens.

“You said it yourself, Topolino, you don’t share. But I don’t think you’ve realized the liberties you’ve been given.”

“I don’t share. I know you have a fucking harem with Hollis, and it grates that I can’t have you like that. I won’t fuck anyone else just to have you—especially not when one of those people is Roman.”

I grip his hair tighter, forcing his head back a little more and making sure his eyes are on mine. “I don’t want you to. You’re mine as well, not anyone else’s. I don’t care who you fuck, you will never not be mine. What you and I have, it’s different than any of my other relationships. Not just for sex, or the stupid feelings you bring out in me, but the way you stood up to me. How you faced my monster head on and didn’t care about the consequences. I can’t let you go now.”

“I just wanted you to be okay,” he says softly.

“Only one person has ever been brave—and stupid—enough to do that for me. Hollis would have stopped me from making things worse legally—or from getting myself killed—but nobody else could have stopped me in my tracks. Not from lack of want, but when I’m like that...no one can get through. No one except Cristian, and now you. The only two people dumb enough, and with a big enough death wish, to take what I can give.”

“I’m honestly surprised Hollis can’t do that for you.”

There’s a bitterness in his tone, and I give his hair a bit of a tug. “It’s not what I need from him. Hollis is my rock. He makes me human; him and his emotions, and steadying presence. When I first met him, I enjoyed the way he didn’t take my shit, even over the phone. When we met in person, he kidnapped me.” I smile at the memory. “He’s always taken what he wanted when it came to me, and showed me that it was possible to have someone. I never wanted a relationship before him.”

Benjamin's features soften a little, but there's still a wariness in his eyes that tells me I have work to do in order to get him to understand how this can work between us.

“When Roman came into our lives...it was unexpected. We didn't need or want him, but one day, he went from being the tiny baby that Cristian and I took turns staying up all night with, to the sassy but bright teen, to a barely-legal adult with an attitude problem. I know you don't like him, but under the arrogance, under the emotional unsteadiness, is an intelligent and sometimes quick-witted person who just wants to be loved. He's much like your Emilio. I think, once you get used to him, you'll find you like him.”

He snorts, but I slide my hand that was on his chest down to his hip again and give him a squeeze. I don't need him and Roman to be BFFs, but they'll have to find their way eventually.

Continuing with my explanation, I say, “Jude was another unexpected twist. Leandro found him by accident. And yes, we all ignore that my son introduced us.” Benjamin grimaces, and when I quirk a brow at him, he shakes his head.

“Just... Leandro being your son means...”

I laugh a little. “Think of it this way, you're at least older than him by a few years. Roman is only one year older than him. They have fun with it—well, Roman does. But yes, he technically has four step-parents. Though, if we're honest, Hollis is more of a father to him than I am.”

It's not as if I can explain why the whole adoption thing happened in the first place. Hiding Leandro from De Luca, and everyone else outside the main Family, is getting harder the older he gets, as his resemblance to Carter, and therefore, Julian De Luca, becomes more pronounced. But, that is not my story to tell. When Leandro is ready to take back his birthright, that is something he and Carter can explain.

“Anyway, what I'm saying is, you all bring something out in me. All in unexpected ways. But only you and Cristian can withstand the eye of the storm and live to tell about it.”

“I’m glad I could do that for you. I saw you spiraling and I just... I couldn’t lose you. I love you too much to allow you to do something stupid.”

Using my grip on his hair, I drag his mouth to mine, kissing him softly. “Thank you. And this is why I need you, Benjamin. You’d rather put yourself in danger than watch a loved one suffer.”

He flinches, and I see the nerve I hit, but I push forward.

“I hope you can see that you’re not sharing me, not really. Sharing implies you only get pieces of me, or you only have all of me when nobody else is around. And that’s not it at all. You’re a part of me every second of every day, Amore. Luce della mia vita, you and Hollis, Roman, and Jude are what I live and breathe for. Don’t doubt your importance in my life, simply because you’re not my one and only.”

Sliding both hands across his soft skin, I enjoy the way he shivers in my arms.

“I’m not monogamous, Benjamin. I was for Hollis, and if I had met you first, I would have been for you. That’s not how it happened, though. Would you deny me the care and affection I get from my lovers?”

He closes his eyes and bites at his lip before shaking his head. “I need you to be mine. But...you were willing to accept Ignacio’s place in my heart, weren’t you?”

I nod. “I never would have made you choose.”

“I don’t like it.”

“Noted. But I like you, and them, so we’ll make it work. Okay? Talk to Hollis. I think he can give you some good insights. He can help you in ways I can’t. He understands all the emotional bullshit. I’m just here to do what makes me feel good.” I drag him closer, thrusting my hips up a little so he can feel my growing cock. “And you just so happen to make me feel good.”

He moans and tries to shift on me, but I hold him still. “Are you sure Hollis won’t try to kill me? I kind of fell head over heels in love with you, and he’s as possessive as I am.”

I laugh. “No, he respects the hell out of you. You’re not like Roman and Jude. You’re not someone we’re opening our lives and hearts to. Just my life, my heart. You’re a piece of me, but not a piece of the whole—that doesn’t make you any less, though. Talk to him, he can help you wrap your head around things. And...you two have a little more in common than you think.” He gives me an incredulous look. “I can’t tell you much, as it’s not my story to tell, but...he might show you his scars, if you show him you’re willing to listen.” Physical and metaphorical. Hollis is lightyears better than he was, but I know his past still haunts him. I can see it in his eyes sometimes, after a long day, when his guard is down, or after a nightmare.

“I still have nightmares,” he says softly, running his hands up and down my chest, stopping to tweak my nipples and grinning when I groan. “There’s still fear sometimes, and anxiety... It’s better, you’ve helped make it better, and made me stronger, but...I’m not cured.”

I shake my head and kiss him gently, first on the cheek, then the mouth, taking my time with him. “There is no cure for something like that. There’s survival, and there’s moving forward, proving to yourself, and anyone who ever hurt you, how much stronger you are. You’re brave, Benjamin, for living through what you did and not letting it change you fundamentally.” He shakes his head, but before he can protest, I place two fingers over his mouth.

“You didn’t. You’re kind, and loyal, and far too good for me. I highly doubt you would be here with me right now if you allowed that fucker to win. So you have scars, who in this life doesn’t? You’re here, and I will continue to help build you up, so if you’re ever in that position again, you don’t have to be afraid.”

Tears fall down his cheeks, and I gently remove his glasses to wipe them away. “I’m so tired of being afraid.”

Settling his glasses back into place, I say, “I know, Amore. My poor Baby Mouse, you’ve spent so long trying to recover alone, but you’re not anymore. Io ho te. Te lo prometto.”

He gives me a watery smile. “Will you teach me Italian? I’d like to know what you’re saying. Not just you, but all the Amatos—you use it far more than we do.”

“Of course. I think it’s important for you to learn. It’s how we stay connected, not only to each other, but to those who came before us. Plus, it’s great to have while in public; some matters aren’t for innocent ears. Though we have ASL for that as well, and LIS.”

“Do I need to know Italian Sign, too?”

“No, you don’t. Cristian is a polyglot. He picks up languages like he does a glass of his favorite whisky. With Jude and Donovan both coming into the Family, he thought it prudent we learn LIS as well. I believe the trips and Soren are teaching him Russian Sign, but nobody else, aside from Doc, cares about that. Anyway, I will teach you whatever you want to know, Topolino.”

He laughs. “You go from a sweet endearment back to a freaking mouse?”

I shrug. “It fits you. Such a sweet baby mouse, and all for me.”

Benjamin lets out a shuddering breath as I slide one hand up to the back of his neck, holding onto his ass with the other. “Yeah...yours.”

This time when we kiss, we don’t stop. Rolling us over, I pin Benjamin to the bed, enjoying the way he arches and moans. “I’m going to mark you—permanently. Show the whole world you’re mine.”

“Yeah...yes,” he whispers, arching his hips and baring his neck to me.

With a grin, I reach into the nightstand drawer for the lube. Benjamin spreads his legs and plants his feet, giving me easy access to his hole.

“Don’t prep me too much,” he begs with a shaky voice. “I want to feel you.”

“Giving demands now, Topolino?”

“Whatever will get you in me, yes!”

“Good thing I want that as much as you do.” Shoving two wet fingers into him, I barely lube him up before retreating.

I use more lube on my cock, and then hold him still so I can push in. Benjamin moans, his hands reaching for me and tugging at my flesh, digging his nails in and making me gasp in pleasure.

“So fucking tight for me. So hot and slick, and mine ,” I mutter, inching my way in deeper.

He thrusts his hips up, and while I’d normally shove him down, to remind him of who’s in charge, I like it when he’s demanding and begs for what he needs.

Reaching for my knife, I sit back once I'm all the way inside him, bringing him onto my lap. Benjamin moans as my cock goes in even deeper. "Hold very still, Topolino," I say. "I don't want to accidentally hurt you."

He blinks long lashes up at me, and his eyes are full of affection that wasn't there the last time we did this—this is more, we can both feel it. "I trust you," he says.

I grin. "Oh, Baby Mouse, you shouldn't."

With that, I hold his right leg down, and just above his hip, I cut into his flesh. He cries out in pain, and his body jerks, but I hold him down tightly as I dig in deep with the knife. Much like when Hollis marked Jude last year, I very carefully carve my initial into Benjamin's flesh. Deep enough to need stitches, but the scar it'll leave behind is so pretty already.

"I can't wait to kiss this spot," I tell him, gently swiping my fingers through his blood and bringing them to my mouth, savoring the taste of him.

Tossing the knife back onto the nightstand, I change position again, making him cry out at the sudden shift, and the pain from the cut as I jerk his legs up, holding them against my sides as I loom over him.

With my dick still deep in him, I begin fucking him, slowly, gently, giving us what we've both needed since Emilio tore us apart.

"Fuck, Tennant..." Benjamin grabs a fistful of my hair and brings my mouth down to his.

We share the lingering taste of his blood between us and he spurs me on, locking his legs around me and lifting his hips into mine, forcing me to fuck into him faster and harder.

“Just like this,” I tell him. “We can have it just like this, Amore.”

His breath hitches. “Ye—yeah. Yes, please.”

Getting my knees underneath me, I fuck him just a bit harder, as I dip my head, kissing along his throat and collarbone until I find the perfect spot. Right along the edge of his collarbone, easy enough to hide—or show off—depending on the shirt, I bite him, digging in and letting the blood flow into my mouth. I bite him as hard as I did Hollis—just without the side effect of almost killing him.

Locking my teeth into the spot, so I can be sure it’ll scar, I fuck into him over and over as he moans, screams, and writhes underneath me. The sounds of his torment, the way his body clenches around me, the taste and scent of his blood, it has my orgasm barreling through me faster than I would normally want, but I can’t stop it.

Pulling back, I grab his hands and shove them above his head, threading our fingers together as I thrust into him over and over, taking and giving what I want.

“Come on my cock, Topolino,” I say. “Or don’t come at all.”

Benjamin cries out, his body arching into mine. His hole spasms around me and I come, which seems to set Benjamin off, as it only takes a few more deep thrusts before he’s coming between us. Shoving myself deep in him, I hold my still-hard dick there, listening to his harsh breathing.

With one hand, I reach down and fist his cock, getting a few more spurts of cum from him before he’s shaking his head and trying to squirm away.

“Shh,” I say gently. “You’re okay.”

As my dick begins to soften, I pull out and look down at him, enjoying the sight of

his body covered in both blood and cum. “You’re so perfect, Amore. So very perfect, and mine.”

He opens his eyes, fixes his glasses, and smiles. “You’re wrong; you’re mine.”

Leaning down, I lap up the blood, first from the mark on his hip, and then the one on his collarbone. “I am, and you’re wearing the proof on your body.”

Laying next to him, I pull him to me, our sweaty, sticky flesh connecting from head to toe. We should clean up, but this, the connection we get from just being together, is far more important. If this is what it takes to get Benjamin to trust that I mean what I say, I’ll stay here for as long as possible. Because I’m not letting him go. Bosses, ex-fiancés, and assholes trying to tear our Families apart be damned.

The Baby Mouse is mine, forever.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

I stumble into the Amato house and groan when I see the time. My fucking luck. They're probably all asleep right now—like I want to be. I make it as far as their fucking formal sitting room before I give up and take a seat. I'd love to grab a spare bedroom and fall to sleep, but I'm going to need to wait for Roman to get back before that's a possibility. I, for fucking sure, don't want to stumble into any room where people may be fucking—or worse, face Benjamin.

If you want people to respect you...

Fucking Antonio. He had to go there. Master trusted me enough to make me his Second. And now this shit? I press the palm of my hand to my chest, rubbing at it. These fucking emotions. I'd go see Sarah about a potential heart attack if I didn't think she would laugh me out of the damn room.

But what the hell am I supposed to do? I'm the one who laid with Benjamin after he was tortured by Jax. I'm the one who took care of him each step of the way, especially as we waited for Ignacio to be rescued. Fuck! I even offered to kill Ignacio. He's the one who promised me forever...

I let my hand fall, and I slump against the couch, closing my eyes. Moments flash through my mind, and they're all centered around Benjamin. The way I wanted nothing to do with him, the way he slowly invaded my life, until we reached the stage where I don't know how to live without him.

That's the salt in the fucking wound. It doesn't matter the distance, part of my soul is always with him. I love Master with everything I have; all my breath, all my pain, my pleasure...but Benjamin? Benjamin is part of me as well. And Master accepted that.

How dare Benjamin compare what Tennant did to Master being harmed? Me protecting Master from someone is one thing. Benjamin wants to be with the one who almost killed him. He was only here for a couple days—how quickly does Stockholm Syndrome take to set in?

I punch the couch cushion, wishing Roman would get back soon. I need to lay down and get my mind to settle. At least in sleep I don't have to think about this shit. Hopefully.

“What did the cushion do to you?”

I jolt at Hollis's voice. Opening my eyes, I take a moment to stare at him. He's similar to my Master in more ways than one. It's why I'm comfortable having him put me on my knees. Yet, he's perfectly fine with Tennant almost killing my best friend. It makes no sense. Il Padrone keeps people in line—why doesn't Hollis?

Clearing my throat, I take the papers Antonio gave me and hold them out. “Antonio found these hidden in the fed's house. He wanted us to go over them together. He didn't have a chance to look them over before getting back to his lovers.”

Hollis sets them on the table in front of him and takes a seat beside me. I shift uncomfortably when he doesn't say a word. He uses silence like I use a knife, the result is equally deadly.

“Do you want to talk about what's going on?” His voice is soft, in deference to night, but there's an underlying steel that sends up warning flares.

Part of me thinks I should push against it, wanting to be put on my knees under him. The other part recognizes that Hollis won't be forced to do anything he doesn't want. Fuck .

“There’s nothing to talk about.” I shrug and avert my eyes, hoping that will cover it.

Hollis sighs and grips my wrist tightly, squeezing until I bring my attention back to him, before letting it go. My body slightly relaxes at the pain. “Yes, there is. And if you get your head out of your ass, you’ll admit it.”

“Fuck. What do you want me to say? My best friend broke my heart? He broke a promise he made to me. I’m the one who stood by him as he recovered, which FYI—physical therapists make miserable patients. I’m the one who, when I saw him awake at night, joined him on his walks. Whether he needed silence, or to talk. I. Was. There. For. Him. When he didn’t know what to do. He promised me forever. I take that shit seriously. I don’t normally make promises, but he wanted one, and I gave him it.”

Hollis fucking growls. I twist so I’m meeting him head on, pissed that he’s not seeing my side, but he puts his hand up to stop my outrage. “Will you get over yourself? Stop acting like a damn child. I was going to try and explain to you that you can love more than one person, have more than one friend, but you’re selfish. You don’t think about others.”

I rear back, stung by his accusation. I’ve never been accused of being selfish. Hell, I’m the one who babysits Cole the most. “I certainly am not selfish. I’m here, aren’t I? Instead of going to Marcus or Keegan. So that we can all be on the same side. Maybe we should just stick with what’s going on and save this delightful conversation for another time.”

When Hollis stands up, I’m almost relieved. At least we don’t have to do this kumbaya shit. I’m obviously not paying enough attention, because he grabs my hair without me seeing him move, forcefully dragging me off the couch and dumping me onto the floor in a heap. Tsking, he drops back onto the couch.

“Puppies don’t belong on the furniture. And if you’re not going to show any decorum, you can remain down there.”

Gasping, I’m unsure if I should be outraged or turned on, because damn, his take charge attitude is a sight to see. “What the fuck?”

I go to stand, but Hollis forces me down again. “Look, I was going to give you the gentle speech. The one where I point out that Tennant is my love, and yet, I’m happy to give him Benjamin because he makes him happy. I know that him being with Benjamin does not negate our relationship, or diminish it in any way. In fact, it strengthens it because we know each other so well that we want to give one another what we desire or need. But you? You sit there like a fucking baby who never went to kindergarten, crying because your friend dares have something of his own that does not. Fucking. Revolve. Around. You.”

Slamming my hand against the floor, fury floods my system even more. “It’s not that he wants to be with Tennant. It’s that he almost fucking died. And what does he do then? He goes skipping right back to the man who did it.”

“Yes, because we’re all about safety here,” Hollis drawls, and I fight a cringe at that. “Not many people can face Tennant when he’s like that. Cristian can. And now Benjamin. It’s a fucking miracle. It also means that Tennant knows what he has, and he isn’t going to let go. He’s more loyal than you can even imagine. Benjamin is safe with Tennant, probably safer than he’d be anywhere else in this world. The only one who will risk his safety now is him—and he’s a fucking adult. He gets to make those decisions.”

This time I remain silent. I hate that he has a fucking point. The panic doesn’t leave me, though. The idea of Benjamin being in danger...Fuck. It’s hard enough knowing that being a Martelli puts him in danger, the fact he willingly marches towards it on a personal level? That’s terrifying.

How can I protect him from himself? Sighing, I drop my head into my hands. I fucking can't, and I know it. Even if it was an Amato that made me realize it.

"I was acting like Ignacio," I groan. Hollis raises an eyebrow, but keeps his mouth shut. "Yeah, I know. But, fuck. Still, him and I need to...talk."

"Without knives," Hollis warns. "And don't think I've forgotten you stabbed Tennant. We'll be dealing with that at a later date."

If he thinks that's a threat, he's very wrong. If anything, that relaxes me more. Because punishment? That I understand. This relationship shit? Fuck, no.

"Understood. Now, can we get working on the papers?" Silence ticks by and I barely suppress an eyeroll. "Please."

Hollis jerks his head toward the couch, and I scramble up gratefully. My body is tired as fuck, and while I enjoy playing games, I'm not up to it tonight. I hand the papers over again, and we both bend down to begin reading.

"This is...interesting." Personally, I think that's a fucking understatement, but it appears Hollis is already locked in his own head, thinking things through rapidly.

"The fact the fed has everything laid out? Our suppliers, our warehouses. Hell, he even has lists of our soldiers, the cops and the judges we pay off... That is more than interesting. I don't know who would have that information. We don't keep it all in one place."

"And they'd need access to both yours and ours. This makes no sense." Hollis thumbs through the sheets once more, but nothing explains this shit.

I tap out a message to Antonio and wait for a response. Grunting when I receive it, I

look at Hollis with a frown. “Antonio says he thinks the fed is a dud. There was nothing really set up in the office in his house, and he didn’t seem to know anything at the precinct. He likely was given that info, and kidnapping him wouldn’t yield anything new.”

“In other words, it would just wave a red flag. Well, there’s things that can be found out in-person, and things that can be found online. Trust me, that is usually where the best info can be found.”

Standing, I stretch out my sore muscles. If I stay seated any longer, I’m going to pass out, regardless of this fuckery. Hollis gives an aborted laugh, but stands as well.

“Let’s get you situated for the night. You can crash while I work on some of this.”

Shaking my head, I grab the paperwork. “Nope. Show me to someplace where I can sleep, and then you should go to bed as well. We’ll deal with it in the morning. I’ve heard you binge on shit like this. You need to take care of yourself.”

Hollis doesn’t say anything. I’m worried I’ve crossed a line, but I refuse to back down. After a few taut beats, he brushes past me and leads me to a guest room.

I go to slip inside, but he grabs my jacket and pulls me to him roughly. He gives me a fucking searing kiss before shoving me back. Fuck .

When he turns and walks away, my eyes are glued to his ass, and I have to adjust my cock. As he turns the corner, he flips me off without even looking back, and I smile for the first time in a while. There’s something about him... I’m not sure what it is, but fuck if he doesn’t just get to me.

Page 37

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:42 am

Waking up in my own bed, plastered to Jude's side, it's easy to forget, just for a moment, that things are a fucking mess. His hand in my hair has me sighing silently, and I wish I could throw the covers over my head and disappear into our bed, never to be seen again.

I'm tired down to my very bones, but I know there won't be any type of fulfilling sleep until Dad and Il Padrone are back with us. If they're even still alive. Every day that passes by gives me more doubts about there being a happy ending to all of this.

Slowly, I sit up, groaning when every muscle in my body protests. As careful and considerate as Ignacio was last night, having sex on a concrete floor is not comfortable, and my body is reminding me of that.

Jude drops his hand from my hair, and I mourn the contact immediately. Sitting properly up, I turn a little to face him. He brings his hand to my chin, to lift my face to his, pressing a chaste kiss to my mouth.

"Okay?" he asks after pulling away.

I nod before signing, "Yes. Tired and sore, but I'm fine. You?"

"Fine. Also tired, but I think that's how everyone's feeling right now."

"Yeah... Where's Hollis and Ten?"

"Shower. They need the time together."

“I’m guessing Ten was with Benjamin last night.” He wasn’t in bed when I crawled in at who the fuck knows what time.

Hollis was awake, but I was too exhausted to ask questions. He just helped me get between him and Jude, and that’s the last thing I remember.

“Yeah. They needed to spend some time together after everything that happened. Establishing their relationship was important.”

Stifling a yawn, I ask, “You and Hol get some time last night?”

“A little bit. If you class him putting me on my knees, before sending me to bed, while he waited up for you, as spending time together.”

I grin. “In this case? I would.”

Jude reaches up and brushes some hair from my forehead, his touch soft and comforting. I lean into it, soaking up as much of the softness as I can, because there hasn’t been enough of this lately. Everything has been so upside down that we’ve all barely had a chance to breathe, let alone wake up in the same bed.

“You sure you’re okay, Tesoro Mio?”

“No,” I reply honestly. “I’m not, and I won’t be until we get Dad back, but for now... Yeah, for now, I am. I have you, and Ten and Hollis. I have Lio as well. So...I’ll make do.”

He studies me, those pale green eyes of his searching for something before he slowly says, “And Ignacio?”

Watching Jude fingerspell his name has my heart thumping faster and my breath catches in my throat. I don’t know how to answer him. Luckily, I don’t have to, as the

bathroom door opens and our lovers step out.

Tennant comes directly for me, pushing me down onto the bed and ravishing my mouth. When he lets me up for air, I try to drag him back in, but he gives me a look, one that does nothing to calm my rapidly filling cock.

“We need to talk, Little Prince,” he says before moving off the bed.

I gesture to my lap, and my hard cock. “Can we fuck and then talk?”

“No,” Hollis says. “This is too important.”

Sighing, I shift my position a little so all three of them can see my signs. Jude goes to reach for his hearing aids but I stop him, setting my hand on his arm. “No,” I reassure. “It’s okay. Only if you want to, but don’t feel as if you have to.”

He smiles. “I know. I want to. I’m aware I don’t need them, but with everything going on right now, I’ll feel better. Okay?”

Guilt spreads through me as Jude puts his hearing aids in, and uses the app on his phone to adjust them. I know he wouldn’t do anything he wasn’t comfortable with; the past year has helped him accept we’re not his birth family. That doesn’t mean I don’t hate that he feels like he has to accommodate us, rather than the other way around.

Once Jude is finished messing with his hearing aids, I open my mouth to start, only to close it, fear keeping my words lodged in my throat.

What if they hate me? What if what I did wasn’t okay? Just because Hollis and Tennant have their own Martellis, it doesn’t mean I can. I’m not like them, my position in our hierarchy is at the very bottom. I’ve always been safe and secure there, but what if, despite how hypocritical it would be, this rocks the very foundation

of us.

I need these three men, more than I need my next breath. They, and Lio, are the only reasons I've been able to get through this mess.

"Hey, you need to breathe, Amore." A hand touches my face as I gasp. "That's it. Just breathe. You're okay. I promise, we're right here with you."

I open my eyes—when did I even close them?—and stare into Hollis's. "I..."

"Shhh," he soothes. "You're okay, Amore. I promise. Just breathe. You know you can tell us anything, right? We're here for you."

Swallowing, I nod, as tears burn the back of my eyes.

Hollis scoops me up, putting me on his lap. He adjusts our position until my ear is pressed against his chest, the rest of my body draped across him. Tennant climbs onto the bed, sitting near Jude's feet, and grabbing my legs, throwing them over his.

"We're not mad," Hollis says. "I'm a controlling bastard, but not an unfair one. You're allowed to sleep with the Martellis. We're not judging you for that."

"I am," Tennant cuts in. "I don't care that you fucked one of them, but I am questioning your sanity for the one you chose." Jude kicks him, but Tennant carries on. "Really, Giocattolo, of all the Martellis up for grabs, you had to go for him."

"Don't," I tell him, my voice low but firm. "Sometimes connections just happen. You know better than most, Ten, considering your relationship with Benjamin."

His ice blue eyes grow colder as he studies me. "I spent more time with Benjamin to feel our connection. My relationship isn't the problem here. Or is it?" He tilts his head. "Feeling jealous, Little Prince?"

There's a danger to his tone that has me shivering, and Hollis holds me tighter, but he doesn't interfere.

“No,” I sign and voice. “I know you need him, and he needs you. I'm happy if you are. It's not a crime for me to find my own happiness. Maybe. I don't know.”

Pushing away from Hollis, I climb off the bed, too jittery to sit still as I try to work through my thoughts. Panic threatens to overtake me once more, but I shove it away.

“It was more than sex. I... We don't know each other, but the way he felt...the care and consideration...” Biting my lip, I stop at the end of the bed and look at my lovers. “I could see his pain, but it didn't feel as if he was replacing Benjamin with me. I... There was a moment when he looked at me, and it felt like he saw me. And I've only ever had that with the three of you.” My hands shake, but I've run out of words, so I sign, “I don't know what, if anything, will come out of it. But I don't want to pass up whatever it may be. I love you. So fucking much.”

Tears fall down my cheeks as I repeat my I love you . “I don't care that Tennant has Benjamin, or that Hollis is playing with Lio. Hell, I almost want to try to pair Jude up with his own Martelli.”

“Please don't,” Jude voices. “I can find my own lover, thanks. So far, none match my type, except for Emilio and Benjamin, and they both come with too many complications.”

I laugh a little. “Antonio is perfectly twinkish. He's also a brat from what Lio says. Maybe when his lover is better?”

Jude huffs and rolls his eyes, before making a “get on with it” motion with his wrist.

“Right. Okay.” I take a breath and continue in ASL, thankful to have another language to help get my thoughts across. “I don't know what will happen between

Ignacio and me, but I want a chance to try. I just... Despite Tennant and Benjamin, and Hollis allowing us free rein when it comes to the Martellis, I'm still nervous. My insecurities have been running rampant since Dad was taken, and I'm terrified this is the wrong move."

"As long as it's your choice, and you continue being honest with us, Amore, none of us will have a problem with it," Hollis tells me.

I give Hollis a small smile, and some of my fears are alleviated just by the sincerity in his eyes and voice. "I want to believe that, I really do."

"Time will soothe that fear," Hollis replies. "All we can do is promise to be here when you need us."

I swallow around the lump in my throat. "I want to try," I say just loud enough to be heard.

"I support you, Roman," Tennant says. His use of my name is enough to startle me, and I look into his eyes, seeing the dark promise of violence in them. "But if Ignacio hurts you, I won't apologize for my actions. He already broke one heart, I refuse to stand by while he does it again."

"Enough," I say firmly. "I love that you want to protect me, but I'm an adult. This is my choice. I chose you and Hol, I chose Jude, and now I'm choosing Ignacio. You don't have to like it, but I expect you to respect my autonomy."

"I do, Little Prince. Just...be careful."

"I am. I have no idea what I'm doing, but I promise, I'm going into this with my eyes wide open." And my heart, but now isn't the time to say that. Something tells me he knows it anyway.

Hollis stands from the bed and pulls me to him. When I look up at him, he smiles softly. “We'll support you, Amore. We love you, and want you to be happy. If Ignacio makes you happy, well, then we'll navigate it, same as we are Tennant and Benjamin.”

“Speaking of Benjamin,” Jude drawls. “He and Ignacio are exes, and Benjamin still hates you.”

I grimace. “Could have done without that reminder, thanks. Maybe this will help us? We both care about the same two people. Three, if you throw Lio into the mix. He can't ignore that, right? I have to be a good person if everyone he loves loves me, too.”

“See, silver lining,” Hollis teases. He leans down and kisses me gently. “I need to get dressed. Emilio brought some paperwork in last night that had some very concerning information about both the Families. I need to speak to H.”

“Lio—”

Hollis cuts me off. “The time for his concerns has passed. We can trust H. I need him on this. Antonio found documents about our suppliers, stash houses, warehouses, a list of men—both those in our employ, and those on the up and up, legally or not. We've determined the fed is a dead end, but this information is a gold mine.”

“It's not information that's readily available,” Tennant says. “Even if they had a mole or two, that type of information isn't something just anyone would know. Especially for both Families.” He looks at Jude. “You and Benjamin are with me today. We, and Joel, need to do some on-the-ground work with our people. Poke at a few sore spots and see if anything falls out.”

“You're right.” I hug Hollis, using him to ground myself as I think over everything I just learned. “They'd need multiple people in place feeding them information, at least

on our side. I don't know how the Martellis are structured. But the only people who would know everything like that are in this room, or Carter and Dad. And none of us are fucking traitors.” I look up at Hollis. “Call H, tell him I don't care what it costs. I want you, H, and Leandro to do what you do best. Follow the paper trail—because there is one. If they're sloppy enough to leave paperwork laying out—in their own home or not—then there's a trail somewhere that can be followed. Find it.”

“I will, Amore. And when I do, I'll bet that if it doesn't lead straight to Cristian and Il Padrone, it'll lead us to the key to finding them.”

As I look into Hollis's serious but kind dark eyes, a newfound determination fills me, and it feels a lot like hope.

The End...For Now