



Arranged to Marry the Russian (Nikolai Bratva Brides #4)

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Category: Urban

Description: He's been watching me for months. And when his chance comes...he forces me into marriage.

I've been trying so hard to prove myself to my Irish mafia dad, but it all falls apart.

When my mission collapses, a much older Bratva guy shows up to save me. But he's no hero.

He's a cold, callous Russian who uses this opportunity to make me his Brava bride...

He calls me his Irish Princess, but it's not meant to be romantic.

He's been observing me, watching me from the shadows like a stalker.

When he finally has me at his mercy, he handcuffs me and subjects me to a medical exam.

And when I tell him I'll try to run, he smirks and says I would never succeed.

I feel so ashamed and guilty about my epic failure to prove myself, and it only gets worse.

He makes a deal with my family, an arranged marriage so he can claim me.

It means I'm subjected to his dirty tricks as he pins me against the wall.

It means I'm stuck here as he plays my craving body skillfully until it comes undone.

Will my Bratva husband keep me in his sinful prison forever?

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Sweat dotting his skin, Adrian Nikolai ducked his opponent's swing with a savage grin on his face. Another hit swung his way and he avoided it just as easily, thick strands of short, white-blond hair sticking to his forehead.

Around him, the crowd roared their approval, but near the edge of the fighting pit, those who knew him just sighed and rolled their eyes. Even his own blue eyes gleamed with cold amusement.

"Get it over with," he could almost hear Kostya growl. But for the first time in weeks, Adrian finally had some time to enjoy himself, and nothing made his blood pump more than a good fight. Well, nothing except for sex.

Adrian slammed his elbow into his opponent's nose, and a fresh spray of blood dotted his bare torso, nearly blending in with his ink. The harsh black and red abstract designs covered half of his upper body, hiding scars he'd done his damndest to forget, and broken only by newer scars he really couldn't give less of a shit about.

"Motherfucking Russian!" the other man roared, face mottling with rage as he ran at a laughing Adrian. " You broke my fucking nose ."

Ducking his terrible attempt, Adrian slammed his boot into the other man's gut and jumped back into position, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

It would cost nothing for him to win the round. He'd been playing with the other man for a good twenty minutes, and while it was clear his opponent was one wrong move from toppling over, Adrian could've gone another few hours without growing exhausted. That was the benefit of being the head of security and the first line of

defense for the Nikolai Bratva.

He was the monster that everyone normally associated with his line of work.

Unlike his oldest brother, Mikhail, Adrian didn't care about being the Pakhan. As for his second oldest brother, Lev, Adrian wasn't jumping at every chance to get his hands on the business side of things. Nor was he like Ivan, the third oldest, the playboy. Well, up until he'd gotten married; now, he was just the party boy. The spy.

No. Adrian thrived on the darkest element of the criminal underworld. The blood rushes, and the blood spills. Mercenary. Hacker. Even thief a time or two when the job called for it. He'd done a fine job for himself, even hiding in plain sight when he needed to. So a little fight with a so-called champion boxer was nothing—not until Rhiannon Callaghan stepped out of the shadows and into his line of sight.

The world around him faded as he took in her appearance.

Dark hair spilled down her waist instead of in her normal braid, the slight curl at the end swaying against the background of her olive skin. She was wearing a crop top, a small black scrap of nothing that left her flat belly open for anyone to see... and that's all Adrian saw before a fist thudded against his jaw.

Black rage flickered through his veins. Because of the hit, he told himself, and not at all because his mark was in a fucking underground fight club in black yoga pants and a top that did nothing to hide her stunning, athletic body.

Snarling, Adrian pushed every single thought out of his head and slammed into the man who'd managed to get a hit—the first one that night, too.

His muscles bunched as he swung, a left hook to the stomach, an uppercut to the jaw. Over and over, too many combinations to count until the ref threw a bucket of water

at him and told him to fuck off. The fight was done.

Leaving the man bleeding on the floor, Adrian left the fighting ring and walked toward the table in the back where his family was sitting: Kostya, Ilya, and his cousin Viktor. Only Viktor was a blood relation, and he, along with a few other cousins, had just joined their Chicago faction after the recent problems with the Irish.

Straight from Russia, the mean motherfucker only laughed at the irritation flickering across Adrian's face. "What did the fucker do?" Viktor sneered as Adrian slid into a chair nearby. "Fuck your ex?"

"Adrian doesn't date." Ilya snorted at that, a knowing gleam in her eyes even as she offered Adrian a drink. He didn't have to confirm to know she'd seen the Irish Princess walking around, too. Somehow, Ilya always knew what was going on around them. Sometimes, even before he did.

"Even if he did," Kostya interjected smoothly. "It's unlikely that he'd give a shit."

While both those points were true, Adrian wasn't in the mood to discuss girls. "Shut the fuck up," he ordered, reaching out to take the drink that Ilya offered him.

Work was starting early tonight, and he hadn't even had a chance to get rid of the tension he'd been feeling from his last shift.

Ignoring the roaring laughter of his three companions, Adrian's eyes swept the floors until they latched on to Rhiannon once more. Seemingly unaware that he was watching, she smiled tightly at something the ref said, fingers snapping a hairband off her wrist and pulling her hair into a tight knot.

What the fuck is she doing? He thought, his eyes narrowing.

Months of watching Rhiannon and her family had left Adrian with the knowledge that there wasn't much the youngest daughter could do without messing up. Her attempts at espionage were terrible at best—he'd caught her months ago in one of Lev's clubs and chased her off only to see her come back again a few nights later—and her job as publicity manager for her father's businesses seemed to be more of a joke than anything, considering her assistant did everything she was supposed to.

In all honesty, Adrian had already gone through everything there was about Rhiannon Callaghan and he'd found her lacking. Spoiled and missing the discipline her older brothers had in spades, the only part of her that she really did excel in was her stubbornness. But that only seemed to get her into trouble. In fact, it was almost a joke by now how many times her brothers or her father would drag her out of the messes she'd created. Hell, even he'd been tempted to step in a time or two. Not to rescue her, but just to question if she had one lick of common sense in that pretty head of hers.

Tonight, it seemed Adrian would bear witness to another of Rhiannon's great escapades, and he settled into his seat with a furrowed brow to see what she was planning.

What he found was beyond a fucking joke.

Tall and slim, the young girl hopped on the balls of her feet with a fighter's grace borne from her many years practicing martial arts. It wasn't the powerful, brutish moves he often moved with, and if she was any smarter, then she'd have learned to hide that as he had.

Power and experience only put a target on you, and if she was doing what he thought she was, then a target was the last thing she needed.

There were no rules in the Pits. Gender, weight, none of the classes that she'd

normally have found at her expensive little fight school mattered out there.

It was pure brutality.

A showdown of wits and strength.

She'd be eaten alive.

And as much as he tried to convince himself otherwise, Adrian wasn't fond of the idea.

"Good show?" Viktor teased, tipping his head in the direction of the ring.

Adrian grunted a response, and his cousin barked out a laugh. Fucking chatty, that one. He never knew when to shut the hell up.

"She's got a good set of legs on her," Viktor continued, ignoring the warning look that Ilya sent his way. "Think she's planning to compete?"

Ilya snorted, beer raised halfway to her lips. "She'd be an idiot to do that."

Even Ilya, one of Adrian's best fighters, refused to enter the rings, and she had no shame in telling anyone who asked her.

Sitting back against the booth seat, Adrian didn't bother to let them know that, if anyone was reckless enough to do that, it was Rhiannon Callaghan. For one, none of his family would really give a shit after they realized who she was. And two, Ilya already knew who he was watching and why his shoulders tensed as she stepped through the crowd to the middle of the floor.

The rest of his companions' conversation faded away as Adrian's eyes narrowed on

his mark. Just a few months ago, Mikhail had been hesitant to put a bullet in any of the Callaghans' foreheads. There wasn't enough evidence to put the entirety of the blame on them for what had happened to Ivan's wife.

Looking at Rhiannon now, Adrian couldn't help but wonder if that would've been a mercy. At least then she wouldn't be beaten to death by the blocky man who joined her on the concrete floor, his head shaved and front teeth missing.

Her death would solve one problem, Adrian concluded, his thoughts merciless and casual, just like he'd trained himself to be.

The only time he hadn't been like that was as a child and recently, when Rhiannon fucking Callaghan crossed his fucking path. His problem.

Swallowing the last of his drink, Adrian slipped away from the booth, sticking to the shadows as he approached the ring.

Only once he was close enough to see the freckles dotting every bared piece of Rhiannon's skin did he stop. And there he watched her, out of sight but tenser than he should've been, as she started to circle her opponent. The look on her face was focused, but her dark eyes were tight with... grief?

Tilting his head, he observed her with a detached expression that belied the itch under his skin. An itch that said Rhiannon was going to end up dead that night, and this time, her family wasn't anywhere around to rescue her from her own ill-thought-out plans.

Bracing himself, Adrian didn't once look away as a fist landed on her beautiful face, and a knee was jabbed into her stomach.

It's only fair, he thought to himself, that she realizes the error of her ways.

The fight didn't last another five minutes as Rhiannon's opponent kicked and bit and hit her until she was blue and bloody and baring her teeth like a wolf. Twin streaks of tears ran down her cheeks as she knelt on the ground.

Get up , he thought, unable to shake the anger he felt seeing her on the brink of giving up. He'd always known she had demons she couldn't shake, but so did he and everyone else he knew. And while it didn't happen often, there was once or twice when the girl got into these depressive states.

Tear tracks, fighting, and booze. He'd seen her go through each stage, and he wouldn't have to follow her home that night to know that she'd end up in her bathtub with a bottle of chardonnay and whatever she pulled from the depths of her empty fridge. Always leftovers, never anything fresh. As if she didn't know how to look after herself beyond the bare basics.

Adrian shook his head. He'd seen enough. He turned to leave as the malicious contender approached, his mouth set in a thin line. But something stopped him. Movement. He looked back, and that's when Rhiannon rolled to her feet.

Quick as a bullet, she darted out of the way and then landed a well-placed, powerful kick to her opponent's stomach.

Winded, he bent over to catch his breath, and another spinning kick sent him tumbling to the floor.

Unconscious.

All in a matter of seconds. And that was grief hiding under the focused mien she'd put on; he could see it properly now that she was facing him.

Adrian's brows furrowed, but before he could question it, their eyes locked. Hers

were dark and doe-like in appearance against his chilling blue.

Recognition flashed across her face, and the reckless girl arched an elegant eyebrow, daring him to do something about her presence in their territory.

A hand on his shoulder stole his attention, and Adrian's focus snapped to Kostya. "I'm heading home. Viktor's coming with me," his brother in all but blood spoke. "He's pissed as a skunk and causing shit with Ilya."

Nodding sharply, Adrian turned his gaze back to the ring just in time to see Rhiannon disappearing into the crowd, her arm gripped by one of her older brothers.

Alone without his team, Adrian had another drink, paid his tab, and then left. His silver Camaro sat in the underground parking of one of Lev's clubs, and he went to fetch it, relaxing in the seat just a moment. But a moment turned into a few hours as his exhaustion took hold.

When Adrian's blue eyes opened into narrowed slits, it was to find the sun rising across his car's bonnet and throwing white beams across his face.

Grumbling under his breath, he started his car and left the parking lot, fingers running through his hair. It was greasy from the previous night's fight. He needed a shower. Badly. But he didn't bother turning into his apartment as he raced across Chicago's streets, window open and fresh air flowing against his skin.

No, Adrian drove until he reached a set of apartments near the Chicago River, and there he waited until Rhiannon Callaghan stumbled out the front door.

Her hair was braided in a crown around her head, and she'd swapped the exercise wear for that black pencil skirt with a slit in the side. Her favorite, he'd come to learn. Or maybe just one of the few she owned. A silky emerald top completed the

ensemble, along with a pair of stilettos that wobbled as she made her way toward a little red Maserati she'd bought to replace the BMW she'd totaled three weeks ago.

Makeup covered the bruises, but by the yawn and sunglasses, he'd been right in his assessment. She'd gotten pissed the second her brother left her apartment. He bet he'd find the evidence on his cameras if he looked.

Snorting, Adrian settled in to observe her for the rest of the day.

He'd placed a tracker on her car long ago, and when she left, he gave her twenty minutes before pulling out his tablet and following her.

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5 months later

Rhiannon's fingers flipped through the papers in her father's office. Invoices, bills, statements... her teeth bit into her bottom lip, and she let out a mutter of discontent. Where was it?

Almost by accident, her eyes landed on an envelope just a few feet away. She didn't know how she'd missed it. Maybe the non-descript color, and because it had been placed between the books on his mahogany shelves.

Darting toward it, Rhi grabbed and opened the envelope, flicking through its contents as quickly as she could until she found what she was looking for.

Bingo.

Savage glee lit up her face for a moment that quickly turned for the worst when she heard voices coming down the hallway—specifically, her father's voice.

Shit, shit, shit. She chanted the thoughts, scrambling toward the locked door. With a flick of her fingers, the lock was undone, and she cracked it open to peek through.

Her father was standing a few feet away in an Italian suit, with his cell phone to his ear and a distracted expression on his face. His hair, longer than her mother normally allowed it to be, was dark like hers but with a scattering of silver in uneven places. Almost rusty-looking in appearance.

Pressing closer to the crack, Rhiannon listened in as he spoke. "Is everything good for

this afternoon?"

This afternoon? Her face fell into a puzzled frown, and she combed through her thoughts in an attempt to figure out what he was talking about. Nothing came to mind; his schedule was clear, or so she'd thought. His schedule, but not the rest of theirs. Her brothers, then? Was that who he was speaking to?

"That's fine; I'm not too concerned about that," he said to the person on his phone. "We can deal with them later. Just make sure the shipment goes out on time."

Oh, realization struck at that thought, and Rhiannon almost face-palmed. The weapons deal. How on earth had she forgotten?

Footsteps pulled her from her thoughts as her father started to pace further away, nodding his head and muttering a few yesses and nos. Likely finalizing the plans. There was no better time for her to escape.

Keeping an eye on him, Rhiannon waited until his back was toward her, and then she darted away, her footsteps near silent as she wound her way around the house and toward the back, where her car was waiting. Almost there... Rhiannon climbed into the driver's seat and—flinched as her phone started to ring.

"Damnit!" she cursed, and with one hand, she started the car while the other reached toward the console where she'd left her phone earlier.

It was just her luck that her father's name flashed across the screen.

"Dad!" she greeted over the purr of the Maserati. "How's y—"

"What were you doing in my office?" he demanded, not even bothering to say hello.

Swallowing her irritation, Rhi shrugged and replied in a succinct voice that hadn't failed her yet. "What do you mean? I wasn't in your office. Don't tell me you had a break-in, Dad. You're holding on to the blueprints for the new club, and—"

Today must really not have been her day because her words got cut off as her father roared, "DON'T PLAY FUCKING DUMB WITH ME!"

Silent, Rhiannon waited, breath hitched and heart racing. Up ahead were the gates to her father's estate, and she hoped they'd let her out. She hoped he hadn't had enough time to stop her from leaving because she was running low on time, and getting stuck at her father's was not on the plan for the day.

With a rattling sigh, her father seemingly composed himself, and his voice, albeit still tight with rage, had lowered. "Whatever you're up to now, Rhiannon, you better have a good explanation."

"Dad, I'm serious. I wasn't in your office." She took a deep breath and softened her tone, hoping it sounded innocent enough. "I just stopped by to borrow Mom's classic Louboutins," she claimed, praying he would buy the ridiculous excuse. "You know I have that party coming up, and those are vintage. I couldn't find them anywhere else."

The shoes sat in the back of her car, waiting for when she got home.

Rhiannon gave a short, sweet smile to the guards at the gate. Her palms were slick with sweat, but they let her pass without a second glance, so she revved her car and sped out of there as her father continued his argument.

"You expect me to believe that?" he snapped. "So help me, Rhiannon, if I catch you doing something that could endanger this family—"

"Endanger? Dad, I'm just going to a party with friends! It's harmless!" Rhi argued,

her voice rising in frustration.

"Harmless? Do you have any idea how many eyes are watching us at any given time? Do you know what stress I've been dealing with? Is this a fucking game to you, Rhiannon?" he retorted furiously, and Rhi felt the familiar sting of his disappointment.

"I can take care of myself, you know that! This isn't the 1950s anymore, where you have to protect me from everything!" she replied, her chin lifting. "You treat me like a child."

Everyone else in the family was able to come and do as they pleased. They knew what was going on within the Callaghan mafia, and they weren't questioned anytime they visited the estate. As proven by the weapons deal this afternoon. Rhi had to be cunning to get that information out of her father's men, and she still wasn't entirely sure if they'd told her the right information or given up something else to get her off their backs before the Skipper, her father, came home.

"I treat you like a child because you act like one, Rhiannon!" he barked, and Rhiannon's face darkened.

Always. He'd always treated her like this, but what was worse was that it wasn't just him. It was the rest of her family, too.

But her father wasn't done. As Rhi pulled onto the highway leading home, he hissed, "If I catch you doing anything foolish again, I will remove you from the accounts. You'll be out on your own, and you'll have no one to blame but yourself."

Her heart raced as she gritted her teeth. "Fine, do what you want. We all know you've been wanting to do that for ages." Slamming her finger on the phone screen, she cut the call as silvery tears started forming in her eyes. That asshole.

"I'm not going to sit around and let him control my life," she whispered in the resulting silence. "I'm not a fucking idiot."

Rhi parked her car in its usual spot, her glare cutting across the rapidly moving waters of the Chicago River. Fuck them. Fuck them all.

She grabbed the things from the backseat and then got out. Her mother's Louboutins and that envelope. But as she took a step in the direction of her apartment, Rhi spotted her brothers lingering on the stairs. Her irritation flared again.

"What are you two doing here?" she snapped as she crossed the car park and headed straight toward them. The twins, Ash and Cian. Her father's pride and joy. He'd raised them just like him, but she didn't know them too well. They'd hardly spent their childhoods together.

"Just making sure you're safe," one of them replied—Cian maybe, she wasn't too sure, but she knew that their concern was misplaced and no doubt an excuse to make sure she wasn't up to something.

She was, but they didn't need to know that. "Why wouldn't I be?" she blinked innocently, making sure her mother's Louboutins were visible as she waved her hand. "I'm just going to a party."

"What kind of party?" Ash asked, and it had to be him, but she wouldn't know for sure unless she could see their ink. All of her father's men were given Celtic knots, but everyone always chose a different place to put it. Symbols of their loyalty and a mark that labeled them family.

Rhi's unblemished skin was clear of tattoos, and that had never stung more than when she had to witness her brothers choosing theirs. The only good thing that came out of it was knowing that Cian had his on the right of his chest while Ash had asked for his

to be placed on his hip.

"None of your business. I don't need a babysitter!" Rhi shot back, annoyance seeping into her words. "I'm perfectly capable of handling myself."

"Are you really?" Cian asked, crossing his arms, and that, along with her father's blatant disregard for her, stirred her temper like nothing else.

"Stop treating me like I'm some sort of China doll!" she hissed, striding up to them both with a glare that could and had scared off lesser men. "I'm not weak. I can do just as much as you guys can." Maybe even more, but she kept that to herself.

"You better only be going to a party, Rhi," Ash pressed, shaking his head. Always the nicer brother.

Meanwhile, Cian's eyes were hard, and he wasn't as subtle as he lowered his head to warn her. "We aren't going to help you out again if you get in trouble."

Rhiannon wouldn't have asked them to even if she was in trouble, but just hearing him say that after her father had said something similar made her clench her teeth to ignore the blunt pain in her heart. She'd had enough of being tossed aside at every opportunity, of being treated like a child.

"Get lost," she told them before making her way up to her apartment, and she looked back only once to make sure they were gone. At the top of the stairs, as she was about to open her door, Rhiannon turned around and found the car park empty.

Not a soul in sight.

Though that was why she liked this area so much, she told herself as she entered the apartment and closed the door behind her.

A surge of determination flooded her veins as she looked around at her minimalistic home. Always the bare minimum. It was something she'd started to prefer after having gifts shoved at her just to keep her docile. Expensive clothes, toys, cars... her family had only ever given her things that could be taken away when she didn't obey the rules.

But Rhiannon was done being underestimated and locked away. She could earn her place in their world, prove her brothers wrong, and finally break free from her father's oppressive control. The thought of the upcoming weapons deal filled her with resolve; she would not let this opportunity slip away.

She placed her mother's shoes on the kitchen counter and hid the envelope under a loose wooden floorboard in her bedroom. Whatever was in there had to be important to get her father that angry. She'd read through it when she got back later.

Getting up off the floor, Rhi stepped into her closet and pulled out a pair of black pants and a matching top. Always black. She'd stopped wearing color long ago after one of her uncles had made a comment about who her father would choose to marry her off to when she was older.

Fuck that, Rhi had thought then, and she thought it every time she pulled open her cupboard and dressed in black. Then she went to the living room and sat down on her couch, waiting.

A few hours later, after a chime from her phone alerted her it was time, Rhiannon let out a breath and steeled herself as she left her apartment and headed toward the nondescript black car that no one knew belonged to her.

The weapons deal was taking place at the docks, and Rhi smirked as she parked a few streets away, then slipped through the fence unnoticed. She didn't mind that they'd already gotten started without her because the information had been good, and she

was finally going to prove herself.

"Hello, gentlemen," she purred, a sway in her step as she approached the shipping containers. And maybe if she hadn't been as excited as she was, then she would've noticed the men standing in the shadows. "Are we ready to get started?"

Her smile slipped through when a heavy weight landed on her head, and Rhiannon blacked out unceremoniously.

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Crouching atop one of the shipping containers, Adrian's jaw ticked as he watched Rhiannon crumple to the ground. He had been following her all morning, as he normally did when her father and brothers were working on tasks outside the criminal underworld they all pretended they weren't a part of. While some small part of him had been certain she was up to something, he had really hoped he was wrong. It had been a long week—longer still after a full thirty-five hours without sleep. Adrian was irritable and grumpy, especially when he couldn't follow the troublemaker onto her father's estate. Forced to wait somewhere that wouldn't draw attention, he parked his Camaro off the side of the road near some bushes that he really hoped wouldn't scratch the paint job. Then he waited.

An hour passed without any notification that Rhiannon was on the move. He spent most of the time staring up at his ceiling. Counting numbers didn't work, and his weapons were all polished. So he decided to use the extra time in the most beneficial way and drifted to sleep, only to be woken a few minutes later as his tablet chimed to let him know she was leaving her father's estate.

Moments later, Rhiannon raced around the corner, revving that poor Maserati loud enough to wake the dead. She didn't see him in the shadows, but he found himself chuckling at her obvious temper as she sped home. Eyes flicking between his tablet and his watch, Adrian gave her a few minutes head start and then followed after her, pulling his Camaro into an underground car park near her apartment just as her brothers left. By that point, he didn't need to move anywhere else as he pulled up the camera feed of the microscopic spy cameras he'd hung around her apartment. By then, there was no doubt she was up to something as he watched her slip on black clothes that matched what he was wearing—flexible and light; clothes he'd picked to make it easier to slip in and out of places unnoticed.

Several hours later, she led him on a merry-goose chase right to the docks, and Adrian watched her with exasperation as she darted around the containers, laughter in her eyes and confidence in her posture. Of course, it didn't take long for the situation to turn dangerous, but he still waited for her brothers to arrive like they always did. He couldn't imagine having to sit watching a woman as reckless and stubborn as Rhiannon, but this was their problem, not his. Adrian was just there to see whether they were planning any attacks on the Bratva.

So he watched as her father's men sneered at her prone form, and Adrian felt an irrational bubble of irritation simmering inside him. He blamed it on having to babysit her, but when half an hour passed and her brothers still hadn't arrived, Adrian started to pace. With all the frustration of a tiger trapped in a cage, Adrian monitored the men as they tied her up in ropes, and he saw her head lift before flopping uselessly again.

Black fury enveloped him, and without even realizing it, he pulled out his silencer and added it to his favorite handgun, fingers molding over the grip while he waited for the perfect opportunity. Half an hour passed, and more men made their way onto the docks, pushing a couple of wooden crates opened to reveal impressive, shiny new guns that were more than a little concerning. Handguns, he could understand, but rifles? Automatics?

His eyes flicked between the crates and the girl, lingering on the latter. Whatever she'd planned to do at the docks wasn't going to happen now. She was utterly at their mercy, and although he'd learned something by watching the weapons deal completed, it wasn't enough to stop that growing sense of wrong he felt the longer he stared.

"And her?" One of the men tipped his head toward the girl with a leer that had Adrian's shoulders bunching. "What's she here for?"

"She's ours to sort out," one of Rhiannon's father's men responded dryly, kicking at her legs. Unconscious, the girl didn't even whimper. Adrian's expression turned deadly, darkening further at the savage grins on the men's faces. Fucking hell, he thought, if they were going to kick and shove her, then they should've at least waited until she was fully aware and able to fight it off. Adrian saw no honor in beating someone who couldn't defend themselves, and even less if it was a woman.

Tying her up, he could understand; hell, he'd considered it a time or two when the troublemaker was up to her usual antics, and the rest of her family were busy with things that actually needed his attention.

Below him, the men were still talking as if it were just any other day. Adrian listened with half an ear, imagining their deaths in great, cruel detail. He didn't plan to do anything, but just the thought of sliding his switchblade across their necks was enough to calm him to a meditative state.

"I'll take her off your hands. Name your price." Interest gleamed in their supplier's eyes.

"You couldn't afford it," the Irishman laughed, his voice rough from smoke as he gestured for his men to move the crate of weapons.

The tension in Adrian's shoulders eased, then returned when the supplier tilted his head and demanded, "How much?"

She always gets herself into a mess, doesn't she? Adrian couldn't suppress the exasperation that washed over him. This time, the Irishman looked like he was about to consider it, and as he opened his mouth, Adrian's instincts kicked in. He didn't have time to logically dissect the reasons behind his actions—he just moved. With a steady hand and a swift pull of the trigger, the man who had moments ago kicked Rhiannon fell, silence enveloping the chaos around him.

Clearly, Rhiannon's father couldn't be trusted to look after his own daughter. He'd have to tell Mikhail that, Adrian decided as he shot the second man. Both bodies fell into a pool of their own blood. No, Rhiannon's father couldn't be trusted to look after his own flesh and blood, and if that were the case, then Adrian was finally certain that they didn't have anything to do with the attack that had been dealt on his family so many months ago.

After everything that happened to Ivan and Amy, as well as their unborn child, things really would've been easier if it had been the Callaghans behind it all—but it would've taken a lot more effort and collaboration to attack, and the Irish mafia's skipper clearly wasn't intelligent or observant enough to have been the one behind it.

After making sure no one sounded any alarms, Adrian jumped off the shipping container and rolled into a crouch. His eyes scanned the shadows for signs of movement, and when there weren't any, he moved to pick up Rhiannon's unconscious body. The other men would come back, but by then, they'd both be long gone.

Hell only knows what I'm going to do with her , he thought to himself, but maybe he and his brothers could use this as a point of negotiation to find out what the hell the Irish were doing with all those weapons. He knew Ivan would certainly agree to it. His brother might've seemed back to his usual, cocky self, but there was an underlying tension in him since the attack. Even Amy—snappy, sassy Amy who they'd all known since Lev and Mia had gotten married—refused to leave her home without any bodyguards. A big change since her disagreement about their security measures, but one that they weren't too upset about now that she was growing closer to her due date.

The pregnancy had been easy enough up until the later stages, but with all the stress, Ivan had kept his wife out of club dealing as much as possible. Though, even if she had been healthy enough to argue, it wasn't that easy when the rest of the men were doing the same with the other women.

So yeah, maybe that wasn't such a bad idea. Two birds, one stone. And maybe after, he'd be able to move onto a few other suspects, though there weren't enough on the list to figure out who the fuck all was involved.

Adrian let out a sigh and deposited Rhiannon into the back seat of his car, gently, far more gently than he would ever be with anyone else. Though, he ignored that as he assessed how she lay there, completely oblivious to the danger that had just passed. With one last look at the harbor behind him, Adrian spotted the cameras hidden in the corners and out of sight. They were older models, and thanks to the dark space and his all-black outfit, he doubted the CCTV would pick him up. Still, taking chances led to mistakes that couldn't be undone. He'd have to double back later to see whether they were actually recording or not.

Stubborn girl, he thought, shaking his head as he got into the car and pulled away from the scene. Always thinks she can handle everything by herself without realizing the kind of world she's navigating. For now, he had to figure out what to do with the beauty in the back seat. First things first, she needed medical attention. Adrian pulled out his phone and called his cousin.

Twenty minutes later, Adrian was carrying Rhiannon through the hallway, separating his front door from his brothers. Thankfully, the former was standing wide open while the latter was firmly shut. He didn't have the time to explain this to more than one person; his cousin was already glaring at him from his living room.

"How the fuck do you and your brothers keep getting into this mess?" Irena complained, her Russian accent thick as she gestured them toward the couch. He hoped she'd been subtle when she snuck away from the compound, though there was no doubt the women had seen. Some, like Mira, were far too fucking observant. Hopefully, they'd just put it down to another injury. The men in the Bratva saw

enough, though they'd been keeping Irena busy with only the most important.

"I don't have the time to explain," Adrian answered gruffly, shaking the thoughts away. He still hadn't figured out what to do with the Irish Princess.

Rhiannon had already started to stir within the confines of his car, and as he set her down on the couch, her eyes blinked open to peer around his apartment with dazed confusion. Adrian couldn't help but brace himself for the inevitable fireworks. Rhiannon's fiery attitude had never been easily managed by her own siblings, and he knew better than to think she'd be any less irritable now. So, as she looked around, he prepared himself for the storm he'd witnessed countless times before.

Recognition crossed her features when she found him crouched next to her, and Adrian smirked as she attempted to get off the couch. "Where—What the fuck are you doing with me?!"

His mouth opened to explain her circumstances—and her kick came out of absolutely nowhere. True to form, she was in a fighting mood the second she realized what was going on; he really should've expected it.

"Stop it!" he growled, just managing to dodge her attack, but the firm sole of her boot still caught the underside of his jaw, and it throbbed while he quickly moved to restrain her. "You're going to hurt yourself."

The crazy woman had a head wound, of all things!

Rhiannon bared her teeth as he snatched at her legs, his large hands gripping and pushing until she was struggling against the couch with short, bursting screams of indignation.

"You're going to have to restrain her if you want me to continue," his cousin drawled

from the other side of the room, and Adrian just managed to shoot her a glare before Rhiannon kicked at him again.

"Handcuffs," he snapped expectantly, and Rhiannon, predictably, let out another rageful shout.

"Cuff me and I'll put a fucking bullet in you!" Rhiannon screamed, scrabbling away from him.

"Really, Princess. That's not very ladylike," he mocked as he simultaneously snatched her wrist and the cuffs Irena was holding out for him. Behind him, he heard her muttering things in Russian that only he understood. Most of it seemed to be aimed at his competency, but he'd dealt with her ire before and knew better than to respond to her mocking. That would only get him stabbed. "You'd think you'd be more grateful after I just saved your life."

"Like fuck you did!" Rhiannon shouted, ripping her arm away as he attempted to cuff her wrists together. Another boot kicked out, hitting him in his gut, and Adrian swallowed his irritation.

"What?" Adrian drawled, adopting an easy manner. "You don't remember getting your ass handed to you by your father's men?"

Rhiannon faltered for just a second, and he grinned. "You really should be careful who you trust, Princess."

Still trying to sneak back on the couch, Rhiannon spoke in a voice brimming with anger. "Then what the fuck am I doing here?" It was a pale reflection of the rage crossing her features as he took the chance to quickly cuff her hands and feet.

That wrath in her expression doubled as she realized what he was doing, and her

shout of "Motherfucker!" came a second too late. "Let me go, you bastard!" she seethed when he pulled away. Adrian rolled his eyes; he didn't expect her to be grateful; she never was. "My father's going to fucking kill you when he finds out about this."

"I'm sure he will, but not before you get in trouble for messing with his operations again. Or am I wrong about that, Princess?" he spoke smoothly, an eyebrow arched at her squirming form.

"Fuck you!" she spat, and Adrian let out a bark of laughter.

"Maybe next time," he said, amusement lacing his voice as Irena finally started examining her. Staying silent, Rhiannon only gave the other woman confused glances each time Irena moved to check her head wound. One particularly sharp movement had Irena's fingers digging into the wound, and Adrian felt a flash of irritation at the pain on Rhiannon's face.

"That fucking hurt!" the Irish Princess snarled, and though Adrian shot a glare at his cousin, who only sent him a tolerating look back, he merely shrugged and replied, "Well, if you stop squirming, she'll be better able to help you."

Confusion flickered across Rhiannon's face, but she stayed still. "Why are you helping me?" she demanded a moment later. More of that Irish temper crossed her features. "Is this a fucking hostage attempt?"

"You have no idea what I could do if you were my hostage," Adrian teased as he leaned closer to her, a smirk playing on his lips. Rhiannon's eyes flashed with anger as she glared at him.

"I'd sooner die than let you have that satisfaction, you arrogant bastard!" she shot back, her tone fierce.

"Is that so?" he replied, running a hand up her leg. Revulsion flickered across her features, but it looked forced. Interesting, he thought to himself. "You might want to reconsider. I have a few tricks up my sleeve that could make your captivity quite... interesting."

Her anger ignited further, but before she could retort, Adrian straightened up and gestured toward Irena. "But for now, you're just going to have to deal with her."

With that, Adrian turned on his heels, leaving her fuming with Irena before departing his apartment for the office.

"Fuck you!"

"I don't fuck injured women," Adrian answered vaguely, turning back to leer at her. "But if you're that adamant about paying me for my rescue, I wouldn't complain too much." A cocky grin spread across his features while her own dropped with shock.

"Maybe it would help if you left," his cousin supplied helpfully while Rhiannon still gaped at him, brimming with anger. "I should be able to handle things from here."

Adrian nodded, stepping out to allow Irena some space, and as his foot crossed the threshold into his office, he overheard Rhiannon ask, "What are you planning to do with me?"

He knew his cousin wouldn't answer her, but it was the perfect opportunity for his mind to begin racing through the possibilities of how to use this leverage to their advantage. He was aware that keeping Rhiannon around could be beneficial, not just for his family but for her own future. And yet, there was something else, he thought, wrestling with the conflicting emotions swirling inside him. He felt a growing reluctance to let her out of his sight, a tingle of protectiveness that he wasn't prepared to acknowledge.

He picked up the phone, knowing he had to call her father. They'll give me shit for this , he thought, thinking about his brothers. He wasn't too sure what his next plans were, but he knew that he needed to handle it delicately.

"Lucian speaking."

"Lucian," Adrian replied smoothly. "You're speaking to Adrian Nikolai. I believe I have something valuable of yours."

"Like what?" the Irishman snapped. "I don't have time to deal with the fucking Bratva."

"I'm sure you'll make time. It's about your daughter."

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Rhiannon lay on the couch, fuming silently as Irena leaned over her, meticulously checking the wound on her head. The woman's hands were gentle yet efficient, and the irony only fueled Rhiannon's impatience. She couldn't shake the escalating anger boiling inside her, fueled by the indignity of being left in such a helpless state. With every touch, she felt a knot of distrust grow in her belly. How could she trust Irena? They were enemies, after all.

"Ever thought about being less reckless?" Irena asked, her voice laced with a strange combination of humor, annoyance, and a hint of concern that only deepened Rhiannon's resentment. Rhiannon clenched her teeth at the sharp pain as Irena cleaned her wound and began to re-bandage it.

"Reckless? You think this is my fault?" she snapped, glaring up at Irena while the woman arched an eyebrow skeptically. Sure, a part of her knew it was—she'd let her impulsiveness get the better of her—but she wasn't about to admit that! "I never meant for this to happen!"

Irena barely concealed her smirk. "I don't doubt that. But you Americans always think you're indestructible," she scoffed, her accent thick and undeniably Russian. The reminder of her own vulnerability in the situation left Rhiannon uncomfortably aware of how dangerous her position was. "Something tells me you got into this mess all on your own."

"Spare me the lecture," Rhiannon interrupted, roughly pulling away as she felt Irena apply more pressure. "You're not my fucking mother."

They both grew silent, and Rhiannon couldn't help but mutter, "Besides, I'm Irish."

"Fine," Irena said curtly, straightening up. "You'll live, but you'd better think hard about your next moves. Don't make me come back to find you in worse trouble." With one last dismissive glance, Irena disappeared through the door, leaving Rhiannon alone with her thoughts and the mounting silence closing in.

Fury bubbled inside her, an uncontrollable blaze fueled by humiliation at being left there, shackled like some prisoner in the fucking Russian's living room. The jerk had left her handcuffed, and his absence felt more infuriating than the situation itself. Who the fuck did he think he was?

Adrian Nikolai , her mind supplied unhelpfully, but she quickly silenced that voice. She refused to bow down to the fucking Russian, regardless of whether he'd actually saved her or not.

While a part of her acknowledged that her circumstances could have been much worse—her father's men had plans that were probably far more sinister—Rhiannon felt nothing but betrayal and simmering anger. How could they treat her like this? Here she was, at the mercy of the Nikolai family, the very people she'd been trying to outsmart for the past few months. And damn it, there was an infuriating sense of safety she felt in the chaos, but she quickly shoved that feeling aside, forcing herself to focus on the gnawing shame in her gut.

This was a monumental failure, plain and simple. No one in her family would ever take her seriously after this. After all those years of clawing for respect and recognition among her brothers and father, she was reduced to being a fucking hostage trophy for a rival family.

A bitter laugh escaped her lips at the thought. If her brothers ever found out about this, she'd be a fucking laughingstock. They'd use this against her for the rest of her life.

Tears prickled at her eyes, but Rhiannon stubbornly set her jaw. No, she wouldn't cry. She couldn't. If she let this defeat define her, she'd never get back up.

Determined, she nodded sharply.

Maybe if she could find a way to slip out of these handcuffs and enact a plan that saved her reputation, she could prove them all wrong. The thought of redeeming herself sparked a brief flicker of hope.

Just as that hope began to dwindle, the door creaked open, and Adrian stepped in, his presence instantly commanding the room. She glared at him, her anger flaring again as she caught the inscrutable look in his eyes. What was so amusing to him? Did he think this was funny?

"Nice of you to finally show up, jerk," Rhiannon snapped, crossing her arms defiantly as much as she could with the damn cuffs binding her wrists.

Adrian's lips curved into that infuriating smirk of his. "Not a fan, Princess?" he teased, stepping closer. "Pity, I rather like you tied up for me."

Heat burned her cheeks at what he was implying. "I don't appreciate being chained up like an animal," she shot back stiffly, hostility creeping into her voice. It felt good to challenge him, even as that annoying spark of attraction twisted in her stomach.

Before she could spit out another insult, Adrian closed the distance between them. She narrowed her eyes, too stubborn to back away, as he pulled something out of his pocket. As he deftly unlocked the cuffs that bound her, Rhiannon held back a sigh. The tension between them was palpable, and damn it, she felt her heart quicken—not just from anger but also from a deeper, confusing attraction she refused to admit she felt.

"You seem very certain I won't run," she stated, breaking the silence. Her voice came out sharper than intended but filled with defiance and distrust.

He chuckled lightly, tilting his head as he looked at her. "Even if you tried, you wouldn't succeed. And besides,"—his gaze grew serious, darkening with an intensity that sent shivers down her spine—"I doubt you'd want to, especially since your father is on his way here. Wouldn't want to piss him off further, would you, Princess?"

The mention of her father silenced her. What did that mean? How did he find out? Panic began to swirl inside her as the weight of his words pressed down on her like a lead blanket. Damn it, there went her plan of redemption.

Before she could give it more thought, the door swung open again, and her father strode in, all business-like, a stern look etched across his features. He exchanged pleasantries with Adrian, and Rhiannon's heart raced at the sight. There was a subtle undercurrent of respect her father had for Adrian, the way he regarded him with an air of consideration that only fueled her irritation and resentment. Did he really think so little of her feelings?

After their brief exchange, her father turned to her, his eyes steely as he surveyed her. Annoyance flickered across his features because, of course, he wasn't worried about her at all. "Rhiannon," he greeted stonily.

"Father," she replied quietly, a lump forming in her throat. There was no pity to be found in his gaze, only condescension. She was ready to burst out with a retort, to defend herself, but he didn't look like he would welcome any arguments.

"I'll head to the car," she said, preparing to storm off, ready for the inevitable tongue-lashing waiting for her. At the very least, she could get away before it happened in front of their enemy. She wasn't sure she'd survive the humiliation if that ever happened.

"No need," he stated, cutting into her plans and freezing her in place.

"No need?" she echoed, warning bells ringing in her mind. "Why's that?"

"You won't be leaving," he replied vaguely. "I've had a conversation with Adrian regarding today's events, and it looks like you'll finally get what you wished for." His tone was heavy, and she felt her stomach sink. Considering his words this morning, she could only guess what he meant. "You're going to take on a bigger role, helping our business."

Rhiannon blinked, confusion washing over her. "I—I will?"

"Yes," her father continued sternly, a warning earnest in his gaze. "I've decided it's about time you start contributing to the family."

"What does that mean?" she whispered, her throat suddenly dry.

"Thanks to Adrian's rescue today, we've decided to put aside our past troubles and establish a new alliance between our two families," her father said, his expression unreadable.

"I don't understand," Rhiannon replied, her heart thumping painfully against her chest.

"Of course you don't," her father scoffed, irritation evident. "It's a marriage alliance. You'll be marrying Adrian Nikolai."

And just like that, Rhiannon completely lost it. "What?! Is this a fucking joke?"

Disapproval flashed across her father's face, and sickness spread through Rhiannon's stomach.

"You have got to be kidding me!" she yelled, her voice rising above the tension in the room. "I've been begging for a chance to prove myself for years, and now you think handing me off like a prize cow is the solution?"

Her father's expression remained inflexible. "You asked for more responsibility," he challenged, his words cutting through her anger like a knife. "This is your opportunity to prove yourself. Don't waste it."

Rhiannon shook her head, frustration burning through her. "So what? Am I supposed to just smile and accept this? Be grateful to be traded like a bargaining chip while you two use me to secure more power?" Her eyes flared angrily, locking onto Adrian's as an electric tension crackled between them. "Marry me, I dare you. I'll shove a knife into you the second I can," she hissed.

But Adrian only stood there, watching her with that same smug grin, clearly enjoying her outrage. "Now, now, Princess. You know better than to threaten. We'll be married, after all." His eyes gleamed with laughter, even as he suggested, "Think of it as a business deal. Two families coming together. It could be... advantageous."

The casual way he said the word twisted something uncomfortably in her.

"Advantageous? Please! This is a nightmare," she spat, looking between the two men. "You both treat me like I'm some kind of trophy to be won! I've busted my ass in this family while you ignore my efforts, and now that you can get an alliance with the Bratva, now you want to use me? Because I'm a woman?"

Her father didn't answer her, instead turning to Adrian. "You'll deal with her from now on. I hope you have better luck reigning in her temper than I did."

"Dad!" Rhiannon cried out, hurt lacing that word. Some fucking father she had!

Her heart raced as Adrian stepped closer, that glimmer of amusement in his eyes only firing up her fury. "Well," he said smoothly, leaning back slightly with an infuriating grin, "he isn't wrong about your temper, Princess." His voice turning conspiring, he murmured. "You did just threaten to stab me."

"Do you think this is funny?" she snapped, glaring daggers at him. The intensity in his gaze mixed with an undeniable depth that made her pulse race; it was maddening.

"Not funny—just interesting," he replied, holding her gaze with that infuriating smirk.

Her father interjected, the scorn evident in his tone. "You have your chance, Rhiannon. What other choice do you have but to accept this? This opportunity doesn't come around often."

"But what if I don't want it?" she shouted, her voice breaking under the weight of it all.

"Then you don't get another chance," her father replied, his voice dropping to an ominous tone.

The room fell silent as the realization of her situation sank in. She felt trapped, but there was still that undeniable spark igniting between her and Adrian, something she couldn't shake free even amidst her fury. She couldn't let them dictate her life any longer.

If she had to go through with this absurd arrangement, she wouldn't comply quietly. She was determined to make Adrian's life a living hell; their newly formed alliance would be anything but harmonious. Rhiannon lifted her chin defiantly, a fire burning in her eyes. Let them think they could control her—she was going to turn this disaster into something of her own making. She wouldn't go down without a fight, that was

for sure.

"Fine," she snapped.

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After the call had ended, Adrian was surprised at how easily Rhiannon's father accepted his proposal. It made sense that they would prefer to align with the Bratva, but he had anticipated more resistance, especially considering that Rhiannon was his only daughter. However, after witnessing her reaction and the simmering resentment in her eyes, he began to understand their relationship a bit better. A flicker of something—sympathy, perhaps—stirred within him, but he reminded himself that this was ultimately a business deal, one where emotions had no place.

As they sat together in the living room, Rhiannon's father laid out the terms with a cold efficiency that bordered on clinical. Adrian could see Rhiannon perched uncomfortably on the edge of the couch, struggling to maintain an air of defiance while the weight of the situation bore down on her. Her father spoke with authority, treating her almost like a child.

"Rhiannon, this is your chance to solidify our family's standing in this alliance," he had said, his tone brooking no dissent. "We need this partnership, and you will play your part. You will marry Adrian, and you will do so with grace."

Adrian had kept his expression neutral, but inwardly, he was annoyed by the disregard her father displayed toward Rhiannon's feelings. It felt wrong to discuss strategic alliances while treating her as if she were merely a pawn. Rhiannon deserved more respect than that.

Silent, Rhiannon had only glanced at Adrian for a second, her eyes betraying a mix of anger and hurt that didn't show anywhere else on her face, before she averted her gaze, attempting to mask her emotions. "I understand the importance of this alliance, Father," she had replied, her voice steady but laced with tension. "But I'm not just a

pawn in this game."

"Stop being dramatic," her father shot back, his voice cutting through the air with a finality that left no room for argument. "This isn't about feelings. It's about family, security, and our future. Your personal desires are secondary to our need for strength."

Once the terms were finalized, her father left the room, not sparing her another word as he walked out the door, leaving Rhiannon behind as if she were an inconvenience rather than his only child. Adrian watched the door swing shut, a heavy silence permeating the room.

At that moment, Rhiannon appeared to endure a battle of emotions. Her expression was conflicted, with anger and betrayal clashing against her attempts at defiance. But as the door closed, that facade flickered, and cracks appeared as despair briefly overtook her. He could see a fleeting, broken look in her eyes—an unsettling mix of vulnerability that contrasted sharply with her fierce exterior.

The moment she knew her father was gone, that facade flickered before stubbornly remaining in place. Rhiannon cleared her throat, tilting her chin up in a way he'd only witnessed from a distance. "I need to grab some things from my apartment," she informed him, her words stiff and far too formal for what he'd observed from her before.

"We can go later," he replied, his mind flitting toward the deal he'd just made with her father. Adrian had to update his brothers before things went any further.

"Fine," Rhiannon snapped, but even he heard the slight crack in her voice that told him she was nearing tears. That surprised him; he wouldn't have taken her the type to break down over something so small. Though, now that he considered it, she had just been blindsided by this agreement—and her father had shown her no sympathy in

facing it.

Before he could say anything to console her, she added, "Don't expect me to fake my happiness about this whole deal," her voice laced with steel.

Before Adrian could stop himself, he shot back, "I have a feeling you'll be much happier here than you were back with your own family."

She laughed bitterly, the sound echoing with unresolved resentment. "There's no need to act as if I didn't just swap one prison for another," she retorted, stomping toward his bedroom. He followed behind her, more amused than he should have been, considering the seriousness of their situation. He couldn't help it, though—she shouldn't have known the layout of his apartment, and yet she'd managed to find his bedroom out of all the rest. If those were her instincts, he might've underestimated her.

"And why's that, Princess?" he asked right before she closed the door firmly in his face.

"A cage is just a fucking cage," she snapped from the other side of the door.

Sighing deeply, Adrian leaned against the wall for a moment, contemplating her words. He recognized her attempt to conceal the hurt, the frustration at being thrust into this situation against her will, but he also sensed the fierce determination brewing beneath that exterior. As he recalled her father's callous disregard, it became painfully clear that Rhiannon's autonomy was of little concern to the man who should have been protecting her.

Shaking off those thoughts, Adrian knew he needed to inform Mikhail and his brothers about the whole situation. This wasn't just a personal decision; it would impact the entire family, and he was certain they'd have something to say about it.

He phoned Mikhail, pinching his bottom lip between his teeth as he considered what to say. It wouldn't help to try and smooth things over—his brother, his Pakhan, wouldn't take the news lightly either way. He didn't want to further agitate Mikhail by trying to change the narrative. Adrian decided to be blunt about it.

That settled, he straightened as soon as his brother picked up, and Adrian wasted no time in breaking the news. "I've secured a marriage alliance with Rhiannon Callaghan."

There was a brief pause on the other end. "Jesus Christ. The fucking Irish? And you didn't think to consult anyone before making such a strategic step?" Mikhail's annoyance was clear, the same tone he often adopted when Lev or Ivan pulled surprises. Never Adrian, no, because up until now, he'd been a good little foot soldier who only did what he was ordered to.

"I know, but it was necessary. The Irish would much rather align with us than stay in their own dysfunctional affairs," Adrian replied, fully aware of how much more complicated the dynamics were likely to become—and that he was now in the middle of it all.

Annoyance flared, but it was all his own fault.

"Still, this raises concerns," Mikhail responded cautiously. "No one really cares about the Irish other than wanting them dead. It's been hell trying to keep Lev and Ivan away from them these past few months. How do you think they're going to react when they find out about this?"

Adrian understood the underlying tension. "When has there ever been a situation without tension concerning brides?" he countered, a smirk creeping across his face as he recalled old battles fought over women and alliances. He decided against mentioning Mikhail's own wedded troubles; that was not a road he wanted to go

down.

Mikhail's voice turned serious. "I get that, but you know as well as I do how the men will react to this. Things haven't been right between the families since the attack."

"I'm aware of the politics involved," Adrian replied, pinching his nose. He hated to admit he might have been a little reckless with this agreement, but if his brothers had anything to say about it, then they could come to him. It wouldn't be the first time they'd come to blows over a disagreement. "Though, you can't deny what an opportunity this is."

He still wasn't entirely certain that the Callaghans were involved. They were far too fucking reckless, and besides the weapons he'd found, they still didn't seem to be coordinated enough for the attack that had taken place. He needed to talk to his brother regarding both those things but now wasn't the time.

"I won't disagree," Mikhail stated gruffly. "But just be careful. You'll need to keep an eye on your bride. Emotions can complicate things," Mikhail continued, a shred of humor in his tone. "I've heard about her temper. The last thing I need is for you to be stabbed because you decided to marry Rhiannon fucking Callaghan."

Adrian didn't doubt Rhiannon would prefer to see him bleed out if it came to that. "I'm fully aware Rhiannon would much rather see me bleed out in front of her than marry me," he replied dryly before his humor broke away. "This isn't a love match."

"Good, I was starting to wonder," Mikhail snorted before his tone turned serious once more. "Just remember your priorities; this must remain business-oriented. Otherwise, we risk everything. Regardless of whatever you've just agreed to, I want to know what the fuck's going on with the Irish Mafia."

"Understood. I'll keep that in mind," Adrian replied, already strategizing how to

manage not only the business alliance but also Rhiannon's fiery temperament, as well as his own spying. One thing was for certain: it would be a lot fucking easier to spy on them now that he had an immediate in with their family and business. So, while the immediate future might be filled with complications, beneath it all, Adrian couldn't shake the thrill of what was to come.

As he ended the call, Adrian felt a swell of excitement mixed with caution. Rhiannon was a force of nature, and he recognized they would have to navigate treacherous waters together. The memories of her defiance stirred something inside him; there was an edge to her that intrigued him, a challenge he welcomed.

He envisioned Rhiannon in his apartment, not just as his wife but as a partner who might complement him surprisingly well. The thought was both exhilarating and daunting, knowing their dynamic could shift in unexpected ways.

But first, before he could entertain those notions further, he had business to attend to. He needed to ensure the logistics for Rhiannon's move were in place, arrange for her things to be transferred to his place, and lay the groundwork for their new life together.

His mind raced with thoughts of the weeks to come—meetings with Mikhail, interactions with Rhiannon, and potential fallout from both families. Yet, amidst it all, he felt more excitement stirring. He fucking loved a challenge, and what better than to win over the Irish as well as finish the mission he'd been assigned along the way?

Adrian was ready to seize this opportunity, even if it came wrapped in complications. He was determined to make this alliance work, not just for the families but for himself and Rhiannon as well. Though it would be fucking hilarious to see how she would react in the coming months, he smirked, striding through the house. He was fully committed to the path laid out before him. There was something promising

about marrying into the Callaghan family, and he had no intention of letting that promise slip away—especially not with Rhiannon in the equation.

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After Rhiannon and Adrian left to grab a few of her things from her apartment, Rhiannon found herself hiding in Adrian's bedroom for the first few days. The space felt foreign yet strangely comfortable, a stark contrast to how suffocated she'd felt when she was living at her father's estate. Still, it was nothing like the freedom she'd experienced while living on her own over the past few years. She couldn't help but hate both Adrian and her father for taking away that small peace she had found.

The plush bedding and stylish decor within Adrian's apartment screamed affluence, but Rhiannon's mind was a chaotic storm of emotions. Each time the door creaked open, her heart raced, and she held her breath, waiting for him to burst in unannounced—and even when he didn't, she couldn't relax.

The first night, she wrapped herself in a blanket, trying to find solace in the softness while reminding herself that this was all part of the plan. Thrust into this situation against her will, she refused to open herself up emotionally to any of it. Rhiannon held a blank facade, forcing herself to remain impassive. She wouldn't show Adrian or anyone else how deeply this was affecting her. She couldn't let them see her vulnerability.

Desperate to distract herself from the reality of her circumstances, Rhiannon filled her days with various activities. She browsed through the clothes in Adrian's closet and his drawers, searching for clues in between his things. And sometimes even stealing one of his expensive Italian button-downs to wear, though they looked like dresses on her, and she didn't get nearly enough satisfaction when she pulled a button or two and wrinkled them.

She had her own clothes, and her new fiancé had made sure to give her enough closet

space to pack them away, but a small part of Rhiannon just wanted the opportunity to piss him off. She couldn't help but feel annoyed when it didn't work.

Not only that, but her husband-to-be was also a terrible roommate, hardly ever at home, though she wasn't sure why that even bothered her. In those quiet moments alone, she wrestled with a surge of emotions—her anger at her father for making this decision, her brothers for their insensitivity when she'd tried to ask them for help, and the escalating fear of what this new life would entail.

"A prisoner in a cage, even if it is one lined with silk," she muttered to herself, trying to maintain the tough exterior she'd built up over the years. There was no way she would show any sign of weakness, especially not to Adrian, who seemed to find amusement in her struggles.

When Adrian eventually did return home, Rhiannon would listen from her hiding spot, trying to gauge his mood before deciding it was safe to emerge. Unlike her father, he never showed even a hint of his temper, and that only unsettled her more. She could handle tempers; she'd been born Irish, she'd seen enough. The Russian's ice-cold gaze and demeanor only kept her on the edge the more she considered it.

It just didn't seem human.

She couldn't help but wonder what it took to make a person look at the world with such a cold detachment.

And when Rhiannon finally worked up the courage to step out, she would scrutinize his reactions to her presence. Besides the detachment, there was a careless ease to him that made her want to both punch him and lean into the warmth he exuded. She never expected to feel this pull toward someone so quickly, and yet, as much as she hated to admit it, there was something captivating about him.

As the wedding day drew closer, the anxiety in Rhiannon's chest only intensified. She employed every tactic she could think of to keep her mind clear—picturing her escape, mentally building up her defenses against the impending humiliation—and yet, the day loomed over her like a storm cloud.

Much to her surprise, Adrian didn't come into the room she was staying in during those initial days, leading Rhiannon to find a reluctant sense of trust in his absence. She hated to admit it, but the fact that he hadn't forced himself on her was a small favor on his part.

Each night she spent tucked away in his room, she found herself slowly relaxing. It didn't stop her from feeling fear and uncertainty, but she felt safe with the knowledge that he wasn't interested in her just yet. Though, whether he was waiting for the actual wedding or not, she wouldn't be able to tell.

Rhiannon had no idea what this marriage would bring, and the thought of being linked to the Nikolai family weighed heavily on her mind.

The night before her wedding, anxiety churned in her stomach like a wild beast. A tight knot formed in her chest every time she thought about standing at the altar, ready to say vows that would bind her to a man she barely knew. It wasn't as if she had much choice in the matter, but that knowledge didn't ease her tension.

As she paced the length of Adrian's spacious bedroom, biting her lip to keep her composure, everything hit her with full force, heavy and suffocating.

"It's just a piece of paper," she told herself, but deep down, she knew it was more than that; it was a bond that would tie her to the Nikolai family indefinitely, irrevocably.

Rhiannon gagged, rushing toward the ensuite bathroom as her lunch threatened to revolt.

"I'm fine," she chanted to herself afterward, pressing her forehead against the tiled floor to stave off the nausea threatening to overwhelm her. "And if anything happens, I'll just kill him," she tried to convince herself.

Something told her it wouldn't be that easy.

Then, the day of the wedding arrived, the morning shifting quickly into a blur of nerves and anxiety. Rhiannon stood before the mirror, adjusting the delicate details of her dress while trying to quell the circus of emotions spinning inside her. She took deep breaths, willing herself to project calm confidence, but the knot in her stomach refused to loosen. She wished her mother were there, even if she wasn't much of a mother to her at all. She just needed someone to talk to, someone to tell her she'd still be fine by the end of the day—but she only had herself.

"You can do this," she whispered to her reflection, forcing determination into her gaze. She'd done her makeup, a classic vintage look with red lips and smokey eyes, and the whole time she couldn't help but feel like she was just a child playing dress up. Marriage wasn't anything she'd ever thought of before. "It's just a ceremony. You'll survive."

An hour later, they approached the venue, and the weight of silence wrapped around her. The intimate gathering felt foreign, a stark contrast to the large celebrations she had always imagined for herself.

She could hear the soft murmurs of the assembled guests—Adrian's closest family members—all wearing expressions of curiosity and anticipation, but she felt utterly

disconnected from it all.

Adrian walked beside her, his confident stride making her heart race for reasons she was still grappling with. As they reached the altar, she felt the eyes of the family upon her, heavy and judgmental. On her side, it was just her father and brothers—her mother hadn't shown up. Why didn't that surprise her? Meanwhile, Adrian's side had a few more people she'd never met before, and one man she was almost certain was his brother, the Pakhan.

Rhiannon didn't bother to think about it further, worried she'd vomit all over the fancy dress they'd procured for her.

The officiant began, and Rhiannon caught snippets of the words that seemed to blur together in a haze of panic.

"Do you, Rhiannon Callaghan, take Adrian Nikolai to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

She stiffened, the enormity of the moment crashing down on her. This was it—the moment that would change everything—her life, her identity, everything she had fought so hard for.

"I do," she replied, though the words felt hollow. She feared she had become nothing more than a bargaining chip in her father's eyes—a fucking broodmare. Bile rose in her throat. She knew it was coming; these sorts of arrangements didn't happen without an heir to secure it.

"And do you, Adrian Nikolai, take Rhiannon Callaghan to be your lawfully wedded wife?" the officiant intoned, snapping her out of her thoughts. Looking at him, Rhiannon was almost certain he was Bratva. Tattoos peeked out from beneath his collar, but the heavy Catholic cross he wore made her uncertain. Was her husband's

family religious? Hers was, though she hardly ever attended church anymore. Would they expect that from her? She'd stopped believing long ago.

Not entirely sure why she gave a fuck, Rhiannon's gaze met Adrian's, and the ice chips in his could've frozen her solid. I should've fucking run when I had the chance, she thought, hysteria bubbling within her.

"I do," Adrian answered smoothly, his gaze never leaving hers.

Every person in attendance watched eagerly, the tension palpable in the air. The officiant announced, "You may kiss the bride," and Rhiannon's heart dropped. This was it, the final confirmation of her captivity.

Adrian stepped in close, and before she could register the closeness, his hands cupped her face. She impulsively recoiled slightly but quickly reminded herself that she had no choice in this arrangement. As he leaned in, her mind raced, replaying all her fears and anger, but there was also an undeniable heat radiating from him that sent a shiver down her spine.

When his lips met hers, a jolt of something unexpected flooded through her—an exhilaration that contradicted all that anger and confusion she felt. Rhiannon melted against him despite her resolve to resist, and for one fleeting moment, all her anxieties faded. It was intoxicating, shattering her carefully constructed barriers.

He pulled away, teasingly letting his lips linger just before retreating, and Rhiannon felt the tension begin to dissipate, replaced by something confusing and unsettling. "See? That wasn't so bad, was it?" Adrian teased, his breath whispering against her lips. Amusement danced in his eyes when she didn't respond.

Merciless, the man was utterly merciless—but why did her knees feel so weak all of a sudden?

Nerves, she decided, refusing to think it was anything else.

"Don't push your luck, Nikolai," she shot back, embarrassingly breathless as she attempted to mask the turmoil she felt inside. As they stepped back, the tension in her neck eased slightly as she let out the breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

Rhiannon's brothers approached, the familiar cycles of disdain and mockery resetting in her family dynamic. The ritualistic congratulations from the men made her anger burn once again. Their words and smiles were more predatory and filled with fake niceties.

"Well, look who finally scored!" one of the twins' tone dripped with sarcasm. "You might actually be useful now, Rhi. Who knew you could land a man with some influence?" He met Adrian's gaze with a sharp, shark-like grin. "You should look happier, considering you snagged something so far out of your league."

Rhiannon wasn't sure whether she should laugh or cry. On one hand, that was the closest thing to a compliment she'd ever heard from her brothers. On the other, they'd just labeled her exactly what she'd hated feeling all along—a bargaining chip in the form of a trophy wife.

Adrian's eyes gleamed as sharp as glaciers under his eyebrows as he glared at her brothers. "I could only be so lucky," he drawled, his arm stiffening around her waist.

"Don't be such a sourpuss," the other brother chuckled, clapping her on the back as if it were a joke among friends. "I doubt Rhiannon would argue with a brute like you. Must feel nice to finally contribute, little sister."

Rhiannon clenched her fists, feeling the anger seep deeper with every snide remark. "You don't even know what this entails," she snapped, her patience wearing thin. "You think this is some sort of fucking vacation?"

"I'm sure there'll be some fucking involved," Ash snorted, and when Rhiannon bared her teeth and stepped forward, they both took a step back. Though she was sure that had less to do with her and more to do with the deadly look on Adrian's face.

The thought stung all the same.

"Relax," Cian said, waving her off, clearly unfazed by her rising frustration. "Now you can escape all the trouble you've caused, Sis. You finally have a life ahead of you in the mafia. Well done. I'm sure you're proud."

The words echoed mockingly in her mind. Proud? The very idea was insane. How could she be proud that her father had practically sold her to get a deal with the Russians? Betrayal threatened to crush her. She fucking hated them.

Looking at them, Rhiannon said, her voice low and edged with bitterness. "I bet you're both really fucking glad to get rid of me, aren't you?"

"Don't act like you aren't just as happy," Ash replied, amusement all over his face. "You were always more trouble than you were worth."

Rhiannon's heart hardened at their dismissal, and she caught Adrian's gaze flickering with a mix of concern as he watched the exchange. It was almost funny that this made her think of him as some sort of ally. Funny and utterly ridiculous.

"You know, the only thing I care about is the business we're bringing in together," she continued, locking eyes with her brothers. "What with my marriage being an alliance. Father might have to look at getting a few new goons. I doubt you'd be able to handle everything without him holding your hand."

Adrian chuckled softly, breaking the tension. "I think it's safe to say that Rhiannon can handle much more than you realize. She's been underestimated for far too long."

"Hell, I could take you both down if I wanted," Rhiannon added in a half-joking manner, fighting for the upper hand despite the tremor in her voice.

Her brothers exchanged glances, dismissing her with a flick of their wrists. "Good luck with that," Ash retorted, a smile playing on his lips. "I heard about the incident at the docks. Doesn't seem any of your fancy training helped you there, little sister."

Rhiannon felt a burning anger at their casual disrespect. At the very least, some part of this day was supposed to be her moment, and instead, she was caught in their cruel game of manipulation, feeling more like a piece on a chessboard than a participant in her own life.

"Just remember that Rhiannon's also part of our lives now," Adrian stated, his tone shifting from playful to serious. "She'll be involved in the family business, and that comes with its own share of respect. You wouldn't want to offend us brutes, would you?"

Rhiannon's heart raced even as she contained a smile. The way Adrian stood up for her in front of her brothers was strangely comforting and ignited a flicker of hope amid her simmering frustration. Perhaps this alliance could be her stepping-stone after all if he truly meant what he said, even if her feelings about it remained conflicted.

"I'll be fine," she said, attempting to assert her independence between the men. "I'm not a child to be coddled."

"Prove it," Cian challenged, crossing his arms over his chest. "And remember, you're married now. You've got a whole new set of responsibilities." His eyes gleamed. "I'm sure Father has already told you he's expecting an heir out of this."

No, he hadn't, but Rhiannon had known that would've been somewhat the case. With

determination coursing through her veins, Rhiannon steeled herself. There was no backing down now. They had successfully wed her off, but she would navigate this new life on her own terms.

"We should get going," Adrian rumbled, tugging Rhiannon away without another word to her brothers. "My family wants to meet you."

As the day wore on and the reality of her situation settled in, Rhiannon maintained her bravado while fighting the tempest brewing inside her. She would show them all—her family and Adrian—that she was worth so much more than they had ever given her credit for. This was not simply a transaction; it was a chance for her to emerge from the shadows of her family's expectations.

She just had to be smart about it.

With renewed resolve, Rhiannon stepped into her new life, determined to transform this alliance into something uniquely her own.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:04 pm

Adrian and Rhiannon returned from the wedding less than an hour after her brothers' taunting remarks. Though other weddings lasted longer, neither of them seemed inclined to stall the inevitable any longer. As they stepped into the apartment, the silence enveloped them like a thick fog, charged with unspoken words and tension that crackled in the air. He closed the door behind them, the soft click echoing in the vast expanse of the living room. They were now sealed within this space—married, yet still strangers. He didn't know what to do with that.

Adrian glanced at her from the corner of his eye, observing the way she moved cautiously across the marble flooring, her gaze roving over her surroundings. Despite having stayed here for a week leading up to the wedding, she seemed just as uncomfortable and suspicious as she'd been when she first woke up on his couch. He'd done his best to keep himself out of her way in the hopes that she would become more comfortable in the apartment—something he'd never really considered doing for anyone else. Though it hadn't seemed to have helped. He caught the slight furrow of her brow as she struggled to maintain her composure.

"Home sweet home," he finally said just to break the tension in the atmosphere. It didn't work, and she glanced at him with a strange gleam in her eye. That look heated his blood, though he doubted that's what she intended as she turned to look around once more.

"You've really outdone yourself with the décor," she remarked, her tone laced with a hint of sarcasm as she surveyed the plush furnishings and carefully curated artwork. "A real palace fit for a king."

"Perfect for a princess, then." He raised an eyebrow, unable to resist the urge to jab

back. "Unless... Would you prefer a dungeon instead?" he drawled, hiding his pleasure when the discomfort broke with a snap and she looked at him with that same arrogant curl of her lip she had the first time she was there.

"It wouldn't make a difference, would it?" she snapped back just as quickly.

He hid a grin. "I guess not, considering the state of your apartment." Adrian had been shocked when they arrived at her place to fetch her things. He'd always known it was rundown, but stepping inside had revealed a place that felt more like a prison. Mold on the ceilings and scuff marks on the floors—it was a wonder her father had allowed her to remain there. Yet, despite everything, her family left him with more questions than answers.

At his words, Rhiannon's lips pursed, and he savored the initial spark of fire in her eyes. But then that moment passed, replaced by a flicker of doubt as she weighed her next words carefully. It was intoxicating and infuriating all at once. He didn't want her carefully thinking anything, when he could have her just as she was instead. Something about that seemed so much more intoxicating.

"Some of us have to work for it," she finally said, her glare cutting him to the bone. It shot a bolt of lust through his veins, but he hid that, pretending to consider her slowly.

"You know, it's going to be a hell of a marriage if we can't even get along in the little time we've had together," he stated, and he didn't bother to hide his leering gaze. She was beautiful. He'd noticed it from the beginning, but here in his living room, with his ring on her finger, he couldn't help himself from the possessiveness unfurling within him.

"Some fucking marriage," she snorted, crossing her arms. "I don't even know you."

"That can be amended," he said slowly as he stepped closer to her. The air thickened with tension, and his gaze dropped to her lips as he reimagined what they tasted like earlier: soft and sweet. She'd given in so prettily. He wanted to see her do that again. She was on the precipice of yielding, and he could sense it.

"This isn't about your father, Rhiannon." Her name rolled off his tongue. "You're here now. We're in this together. He doesn't really have a say in what happens after the wedding."

Her breath hitched, a moment of hesitation crackling between them, filling the space with electricity. "Together? Is that what you call this? Because it feels more like a trap."

"Does it?" He leaned closer until her back was pressed against the wall, until there was barely any distance between them, and when her breath hitched, his dick tented in his pants. A smirk curled across his lips. "Why's that?"

"I—I don't know," she swallowed, licked her lips, and he nearly groaned. What would it take to get her to drop to her knees? To put those pretty pink lips around the head of him?

Something must've shown in his expression, something about the way he felt with her so close and yet so distant. Because the heat in her gaze nearly dropped him to his knees, and fuck, if she wasn't about to go down on him, then he'd be more than happy to give her a good reason. Starting with his mouth on her cunt.

His eyes dragged down, feeling heavy-lidded as he thought about it. About how wet she'd be. And if the way she squirmed right then was any indication of what she was trying to hide, he was more than tempted to rip that dress off of her and check.

"I know my dad wants something out of this," she said, breaking him from his

thoughts, and when Adrian met her eyes again, her chest was heaving. Pleasure turned to cocky arrogance within him as he realized he'd done that, just by standing in front of her.

Yes, Lucian had been very specific, even pulling him aside at the wedding to remind him of what they'd agreed on. Shares in the business, an heir to seal the deal. He knew all about it. Didn't mind the baby-making part, though he wasn't really a fan of being a father so soon.

"Of course he does, but that doesn't mean what you want has to be sidelined," Adrian purred, his eyes locked onto hers. He'd been watching her from the beginning, he knew his wife was ambitious. He wouldn't mind making her his queen, especially if it meant throwing it in the face of her idiot-brothers. And if she thought to reward him for that, he wouldn't mind that either.

"Tell me what you want, Princess."

He knew what he wanted. Her, naked and writhing, in his bed. What would she want in the bedroom? The intriguing mixture of resolve and hesitation spilling across her features drew him in. The kiss that they'd shared at the altar sent sparks down his spine, and his balls tightened almost painfully.

He'd more than give it to her if he could. He reached a finger to curl around a lock of her hair. "Power?" he remarked casually, dipping to touch his nose to her jaw, breathing in the scent of her. "You're married to me now, Gorgeous. That comes with the position."

"And what do you want in return?" she stammered, her voice breathless.

Her, was his only thought—and what a fucking addicting thought it was.

Adrian leaned back to stare down at her, his tone teasing and deep with arousal. "For you to stay, for one. It won't be easy convincing your father to continue with this agreement if you aren't here."

She held his gaze defiantly, yet he could see the crack in her armor. Beneath that bravado lay the seeds of fear—fear of the unknown, fear of what lay ahead. It cleared the desire and replaced it with logic. Jesus. Fucking. Wept. "Do you really think I'd run?" The anger in her voice was palpable, but beneath it, he felt the uncertainty surging like a live wire. "It's not like I have much choice in this."

"I'm not accusing you," he drawled, tugging her hair a little harder before letting it go. Her eyes darkened, and his blood heated further. "Just telling it how I see it."

"Well, I see it as a fucking prison sentence," she hissed, her eyes flashing. "I don't know you beyond your reputation, Adrian. And there's nothing about that to make me any less worried for my safety, regardless of whatever deal you made with my father. I wouldn't be the first mafia wife to drop dead after I've given you what you need."

He nearly frowned. That was so far out of any way that he would act. "What if I told you I wouldn't hurt you?" His voice dropped to a whisper, heavy with meaning. He wouldn't have, even if she hadn't brought it up, but he could see it bothered her. "What if I told you that you could be more than just what your father intends you to be? I'm not looking for a housewife, Princess. Though, I wouldn't say no to you making me breakfast in bed."

Time seemed to stretch as he watched her eyes shift, acknowledging the tension that simmered between them. Every instinct urged him to close the distance, to explore the potent energy that enveloped them, but he halted, needing to respect her boundaries, even if that was all he could give her at the moment. The rest would come later; he'd make sure of it.

Rhiannon's breath caught again, the flicker of vulnerability brightening her features before she masked it with steely resolve once more. "Even if you say so, I wouldn't believe it. Trust is earned, Adrian," she said, her voice firm but strained, the underlying fear simmering just beneath the surface. "You can't expect that to happen overnight."

"I wouldn't expect anything less." He challenged her with unwavering intensity. "But we can start by being honest. About each other, about this... arrangement."

"Honest about what? When you want to fuck me?" she scoffed, her laughter derisive. "You aren't subtle and I'm more than fucking sure my father's already made his demands regardless of what you want in a wife."

Her brows furrowed, reflecting the silent battle waging within her. He could almost feel the distance crackling between them, a magnetic pull that seemed to defy logic, and the tension hovered dangerously close to snapping.

The air felt electric, charged with a palpable force that dared them to cross the line. He could sense her breath hitching as defiance warred within her. For a split second, she seemed ready to lean into him, to allow the connection to bind them, but then she pulled back.

"Let's just get it over with, shall we? Whatever this is supposed to be," she snapped, waving her hand nonchalantly as she turned on her heel, breaking the tension like a wave crashing against the shore. His dick throbbed even while he gritted his teeth in annoyance.

"Do you want me here?" she taunted, her eyes blazing with anger that contradicted how her body trembled. Not with lust, though, and that's what stopped him. She might've been a damn good actress, but her body gave away the fear she was trying to ignore. "Like this?"

She arched an eyebrow as she pulled herself up onto his dining room table, spreading her legs, a hand sliding down to pick up the edge of her dress. He caught a glimpse of the black thong she wore underneath and he stifled his groan, his eyes eating up the sight of her sun-kissed and slender legs splaying open for him.

"Are you going to make me scream your name, Adrian?" she continued to taunt, her lips pulled into a sneer. And maybe if he were a lesser man, he could've done exactly what she wanted and fucked her on his dining room table. But he wasn't, and he could see her attempt for what it was, a desperate attempt at regaining some of the power she thought she'd lost. But that wasn't the kind of desperate he wanted from her, and he was more than happy to wait until he got it.

"Next time, Gorgeous." Adrian let his smirk deepen; as frustrating as it was, it would take time to earn her trust.

And with her staring at his back in shock, he turned away, slipping his keys into his pocket. "I'm heading to the office. Make yourself at home," he called over his shoulder, trying to ignore the heat of attraction that roared through him like wildfire, making the distance between them feel unbearable. Fucking hell, he should've opted for a shower first. Not like he could turn back now. As much control as he had, Rhiannon tested every bit of it.

Twenty minutes later, he entered his office feeling a bit smug about the glare Rhiannon had focused on him as he left.

It was entertaining, this dance they were engaged in—the push and pull, the undeniable chemistry that wrapped around them like smoke.

Whistling under his breath, he wondered what it would take for her to snap that little bit of rigid control she was holding onto so dearly. He snagged some of the paperwork scattered across his desk, eager to finish up what he'd been busy with that

morning before the wedding, but Rhiannon lingered in his thoughts, captivating and complicated.

No matter how hard he tried to concentrate, unease began to stir within him. His instincts prickled; what was she up to now? For some reason, he couldn't see her getting comfortable as he'd instructed, and that, out of everything, left him on edge. If she was desperate enough to try and throw herself at him, just to get the upper hand, what else would she do if left alone long enough?

She wouldn't run, would she?

She'd told him she wouldn't, and he'd known better than to believe that. So why did he think it would be okay to leave her alone? Pulling out his phone, Adrian accessed the camera feeds he had installed around his apartment. They had been a necessity for security, but now they offered a welcome tether to his little wife.

The view flickered to life within seconds, and his brow furrowed when he noticed nothing but empty air staring back at him.

Where was she? Panic unfurled in his gut, pushing aside the smugness he had previously felt. He furiously scrolled through the angles, frustration building with each empty shot.

Annoyed, Adrian flicked back to around the time he'd left, and then, just as he thought all hope was lost, she flickered into view right where he'd left her. Eyes narrowed, he watched what she did next, then let out a growl under his breath when Rhiannon stepped out of his apartment, striding toward the elevator. The time on the camera felt like it was mocking him. She hadn't even waited ten minutes to make sure he'd actually left.

A few minutes later, his whole body bristled again as he watched her break the

window of his Camaro and drive off. Good intentions be damned, he was definitely going to punish her for that.

The one fucking time he'd chosen to take the SUV. Adrian's pulse pounded as he gritted his teeth. For fuck's sake.

His heart raced; disbelief twisted into determination as he lunged up from his desk, actions propelled by instinct. He might've been happy to show her how much power she really had in this situation, but there was no way in hell he was letting her leave—and with his fucking car, no less.

As he stormed out of his office, his mind raced with the implications of her departure. Was she really that naive to think she could outrun him? Or was she testing him? The thrill of the unknown both irritated and intrigued him. Rhiannon was a puzzle he had yet to solve. It was a good thing he loved puzzles.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:04 pm

Rhiannon's heart raced as she navigated the streets, the adrenaline from her escape blending with a tumultuous cocktail of trepidation and lust. The electric tension between her and Adrian had ignited something primal within her—something that bordered on dangerous. Once again, she felt the weight of the world pressing against her, but the instinct to flee outweighed everything else. As exhilarating as their exchanges had been, they left her feeling vulnerable and exposed, flaying her insecurities wide open. The thought of being owned by anyone, especially him, twisted inside her like a knife.

Figuring it was unlikely that Adrian would put a tracker on his own car, she'd broken into the silver Camaro in their underground parking garage and then driven it to the one place she knew no one would ever find her: a warehouse she had owned in secret since moving back to Chicago. It was her sanctuary and safety net, containing all the things that represented the independence she had fought so hard to maintain. It wasn't just a hiding spot; it was a statement. No one owned her. Not her father, not the Bratva, and certainly not her new husband.

As she parked the car inside, determination surged through her. The warehouse was equipped with the best security and housed a small safe house that could easily hold Adrian's car alongside her Maserati. The car everyone thought was still getting fixed. It also contained her collection of custom weapons—a testament to her autonomy. She wasn't planning to stay here indefinitely, but a night away felt necessary, a defiant act against the new life she had been thrust into. She'd spent more time on this place in the past few months than ever before, her instincts screaming that something bigger was coming. Bigger than her father sending her to boarding school just to get rid of her. She didn't know why she hadn't listened to them. Maybe she wouldn't be in this position if she had.

Abandoning the car, Rhiannon settled into the safe house as exhaustion washed over her. Now that she could finally relax, it wasn't long before she fell asleep, her mind flickering between thoughts of Adrian and the fiery exchanges they had shared. She still couldn't believe he hadn't taken her up on what she'd offered him. What man didn't want to fuck as soon as he could? Much to her disgust, the dreams that invaded her rest reflected the things she felt when he had pushed her against the wall, or when he'd watched her spread her legs on the table. She whimpered in her sleep, fingers drifting down to her thighs as she squirmed around on her bed. When her eyes flickered open, she moaned under her breath, tired and hot, teetering on the cusp of something she'd rather die than admit. Still high on the dreams of Adrian's coiled body balancing over hers and the imaginings of the low, animalistic noises he might make in her ear—grumbles of her name like he'd murmured when his nose slid against her neck earlier—Rhiannon began to touch. Heat flickered between her legs, and her throat bobbed as sweat dotted her skin.

The one thing her warehouse lacked was air conditioning, not that she cared about that at that specific moment. Moaning softly again, she slipped her fingers over her clit, rubbing until sparks lit up her vision and her thighs tightened sweetly.

An orgasm loomed closer, thoughts of his ice-blue eyes and white-blond hair haunting her—but before she could get anywhere, a sudden noise interfered with her concentration, dragging her out of the moment and into the present.

Heart hammering in her chest, she strained to listen, recognizing the sound of a door opening. Panic clawed at her throat, and for a few harrowing moments, she couldn't make sense of what was happening. And then she saw him—Adrian, glaring down at her with that unmistakable mix of annoyance and amusement. His gaze flickered to where her hand was still frozen, and hunger darkened his expression.

"Don't pause on my account," he drawled, leaning against the wall with crossed arms, and in her still-sleepy daze, she nearly did continue.

Her fingers curled under his darkening gaze, and her mouth parted as a moan got stuck in her throat. Then he took a step forward, and Rhiannon's fight-or-flight kicked in. She snatched her hand away and tried to stumble out of bed—tried being the operative word because Adrian grabbed her the second she moved.

"Put me down!" she yelled, futilely pounding her fists against his back, but he remained steadfast, moving gracefully despite her struggles.

"Please, Adrian. Put me down." This was so goddamned embarrassing, her cheeks burned. She'd almost... and he'd been watching ... she didn't know what to think other than the fact that she had to get out of there, and soon.

"No," he snapped, his palm landing on her ass with a sharp smack that shouldn't have tightened her core like it did. "Not if you're going to try and run away again."

Stilled by the grip around her waist, Rhiannon began swearing, punching, and kicking at him, desperate to assert her space. Maybe then she could pretend this hadn't happened, and that she wasn't slowly growing more turned on by being him being so domineering. Her struggles managed to free her enough that she stumbled to the ground—but Adrian remained unfazed. He simply gathered her around her legs and lifted her over his shoulder again, carrying her like a caveman.

"I won't!" she shouted, giving up and hating that she meant it. Her body slumped over his shoulder, she felt defeated. And turned on. She ignored that last bit. "I didn't mean to anyway."

Adrian dumped her back on the bed, and she glared up at him.

It was infuriating; she couldn't help but feel both furious and absurdly excited at the same time. Her face burned from the embarrassment of being caught—and in that position, no less. Humiliation sent a jolt of warmth through her veins, she wished she

didn't feel it. She wished it didn't make her heart race for all the wrong reasons.

"Why did you do it then?" he asked, his voice low, a question laced with something deeper.

It struck her in that moment how dangerously intertwined they had become, like flames desperate to synchronize in their flickering dance. She felt cornered, not just by the physical space between them but by the emotional weight creeping into every exchange.

"Because your presence makes me feel like everything I had is slipping away," she admitted, swallowing hard, her breath hitching under the intensity of his gaze.

"You think I'm a threat?" Adrian challenged softly, stepping closer despite the attempt she made to add more distance between them. The air warmed with raw intent, something deep and wild simmering beneath the surface.

He was a threat, she thought stubbornly.

"I'm not a threat to you, Rhiannon."

"I didn't say that," she snapped back, hating that he could somehow read her, and trying to regain her composure. The heat in his gaze softened her, and she glared at the floor instead. "I know you're not a threat." Not to her health or body, at least. Just from how he'd acted since this whole damn arrangement had started, she knew he wasn't going to hurt her in that way.

"Then what are you afraid of?" he asked, his voice coaxing.

"Nothing!" She glared at him, wishing he could just drop dead.

A low, rumbling chuckle answered her as he crawled atop her on the bed. "Does this scare you?" he teased, running a hand up her side. The wedding dress was a crumpled mess in the bathroom, and she'd been running hot thanks to the adrenaline. Because of that, Rhiannon had pulled on her usual crop top and shorts to sleep in. A part of her regretted that as she felt the heat of his hand running along her side.

"I'm not afraid of you, Adrian." Her face burned, and Rhiannon glared at the wall behind him. He continued to touch, and the look on his face made it feel like he couldn't help it. Like he couldn't resist—she was forced to wonder if it was because of what he'd walked in on.

"Stop it," she said, feeling tired. She didn't know why, but she knew he would. And he did, pulling away enough that she could squirm out from under him. Something about that tugged at her heart strings, and before she even knew it, Rhiannon felt herself admitting the truth. Her throat bobbed, and the words she spoke were quiet. "You're a reminder that this—whatever this is—has already taken too much from me."

Adrian's smirk faltered, and for a heartbeat, reality made itself known. Rhiannon was teetering on the edge, caught between a dangerous game and a desire she hadn't been prepared to face.

"So, what is it that you want?" he asked, still leaning onto the bed slightly as she pulled back until her spine met the headboard. Almost as if he was challenging her to relinquish her tight grip on whatever measure of control she thought she had, pushing her even closer to the precipice.

She wasn't sure how to answer that, but something told her he already knew. All she could focus on was the rapid pounding in her chest, stirred by his unwavering gaze—alluring and unsettling. He drew even nearer, not touching but advancing all the same. It felt like he was testing her. Mere inches away, the heat radiating from him merged with that which was boiling under her skin. He was the flame, and she

was a moth drawn far too close. Rhiannon wrapped her arms around her knees and met his stare dead on. She couldn't ever remember being this terrified of getting burned.

"I want..." She faltered, thrown off-kilter by the intensity radiating off him. "I want to feel in control." She'd had far too much taken from her already.

"Control? You think I'm trying to take it from you?" Adrian asked, so close that she could see each fleck of mischief in his deep-set eyes. "Or are you just afraid of what you might really want? Because I'll tell you a secret, Rhiannon... the harder you fight, the more thrilling it becomes."

Adrian reached out, lightly brushing a finger along her arm, the touch igniting a wildfire beneath her skin. The familiarity of his touch left Rhiannon's breath caught in her throat, her instincts screaming at her to flee again, yet a part of her was compelled to stay—drawn to the addictive tension between them.

"It's too easy to get lost in the idea of what we want versus what we need," she murmured, sliding off the bed, desperate to create distance before that connection ensnared her completely. "And right now, I just need to think."

He followed her, because of course he would. Misplaced laughter bubbled in her chest as the dance continued around her bedroom.

"If that were the case, you could've done that at the apartment." Adrian leaned closer, challenging in ways she had never seen before, yet the way he said it hinted at an intimacy she wasn't ready for. "No, Princess, you're not here because you want to think. You're here because you want to escape. I can help you with that, but I can't help you run away."

That was it—something in her snapped. Rhiannon shook her head, determined not to

become another pawn in the game.

"Forget it."

That instinct to flee took over her body again, and she turned sharply and rushed for the door, adrenaline surging through her veins. She flung open the bedroom door, racing through the warehouse without looking back, her heartbeat echoing in her ears like war drums. She had to escape before the temptation to stay consumed her whole.

Adrian was fast, though. She hadn't made it far when she heard him call out after her, his voice a potent mixture of confusion and frustration. "Rhiannon, where are you going? You said you weren't going to run."

"You think I need your permission?" she shot back, feeling powerful despite the fluttering dimensions of fear coiling in her stomach.

"You know you don't," he said as she burst through the garage, navigating her way past her shelves of weapons. Rage and resolve propelled her forward—an unyielding determination coursing through her as the glint of the metal doors shone under the fluorescent lights as she hurried to her sanctuary, the Camaro.

She could feel his prowling presence, and more than just anxiety fluttered in her stomach as she closed the distance between herself and the car.

"You're better than this," Adrian purred and as she reached for the door handle, she felt the world drop away. Rhiannon squeaked, she couldn't help it, the sound just slipped out. She'd been in the process of swinging the door open to climb inside when Adrian's voice rang out behind her, tauntingly close. "You can do much better than hiding away."

"Fuck off!" she yelled in frustration, trying to slam the door shut. She could damn

well hide if she wanted too! But Adrian was too quick, a flash of movement as he lunged toward her, grabbing the door with a grip that felt both possessive and infuriatingly intimate.

"Rhiannon," he said, his voice low and cool, a chuckle laced within as he leaned into the car, blocking her access and stealing her breath. She hadn't expected him to follow her, hadn't anticipated how quickly he'd close the gap.

"Haven't you already realized that you're not getting away that easily?"

The tension hung between them, crackling and raw. Rhiannon's heart pounded furiously, caught between anger and an all-consuming attraction that threatened to tear her apart.

"You're insufferable," she hissed, but the words lacked the cutting edge she had intended.

"Maybe," he said, a smirk playing at the corners of his lips. "But you're attached to me now—whether you like it or not."

Rhiannon let out another squeak as he picked her up again, the sound turning irritable when he dropped her into the passenger seat of his Camaro. Adrian slipped the seatbelt on her and then slammed the door while she was still too stunned to process.

Ten minutes later, they arrived back at his block of apartments, and Rhiannon had to endure the indignity of being carried all the way to the top.

"I can walk," she said, her heart hammering furiously.

"I wouldn't want to put you out," he drawled, his voice deep and gruff in a way that made her thighs clench. Damn it, after all those dreams, she couldn't shake the image

of him thrusting into her out of her mind. Those muscles coiled like they were now, but with an entirely different tension than the frustration he was currently brimming with.

Once inside the apartment, he set her down, and she wasted no time storming straight for the bedroom, slamming the door behind her. She was furious about the whole thing and intended to sulk in peace. And even though it took her ages to fall asleep after his ominous promise, she eventually drifted off surprisingly well.

When she awoke, disoriented but alert, Rhiannon assumed Adrian had either not come to bed at all or had left early, as there was no evidence of him having spent the night next to her. Brushing off the remnants of sleep, she figured that he might've slept on the couch like he had before. Without questioning it any further, Rhiannon headed to the bathroom, only realizing what she'd stepped into when a deep, masculine moan filtered through the sleepy haze and woke her right up.

Suddenly alert and standing idly in the middle of the bathroom, Rhiannon gaped. None of her dreams had given her husband's body any justice, she realized, as the previous night's unsuccessful orgasm flooded her body with tension.

Water flicking against his fair skin, Adrian leaned against the shower tiles and met her eyes with a wicked grin, and let out a thick groan as he fisted his cock. Rhiannon blinked, half certain he was teasing her, while the other half couldn't help but stare at every single part of him on display. Every inch of him was a reminder of the attraction she'd fought so hard to deny, yet here he was, presenting himself with that Cheshire cat grin that threatened to unravel her resolve.

"Miss me, Gorgeous?" he said lightly, his voice dripping with a teasing undertone that made her pulse quicken. Or no, maybe it was the way he was stroking himself

one-handedly, his fingers firmly tugging at his erection until precum dripped from the head of it.

Rhiannon wanted to scoff, to throw some sarcastic remark back at him, but instead, she felt a heat brewing beneath her skin, filling her cheeks with color.

"You shouldn't have barged in like that," he chastised, not even attempting to sound irritated, she realized as a part of her savored the view. The way his muscles rippled with his every movement was a sight she couldn't easily shake.

"The door was unlocked," she mumbled distractedly, her bottom lip pinched between her teeth as his eyes darkened.

"Pity," he said roughly, fingers moving languidly over himself. "Enjoying the view?"

Yes, her mind answered, and not that she would ever admit it, but that small part of her sounded just as whiny and breathless as Rhiannon knew her voice would be if she said anything at all.

So, she kept quiet instead.

"Is that what you normally wear to bed?" he asked, amusement dancing in his voice as he gestured toward the itchy-bitsy pajamas clinging to her skin. "It looks more like workout gear."

She looked down at her clothes again, it was just a sports bra and shorts. Nothing special, though it showed off a lot of skin, something she'd realized after she got over the embarrassment of him catching her with her hand... Oh, god, and now he... and his hand.

"What's it to you?" she shot back, defiance lacing her words as she faced him once

more, but she could feel the heat creeping back in, striking a balance between embarrassment and indignation. It wasn't something she'd worn before, too scared about what he'd do—though she knew now, she'd been silly for even thinking Adrian would ever do that to her. He seemed to prefer taunting her.

"It shows off your assets beautifully," he said, his grin widening. The confidence that rolled off him was like a dangerous tide sweeping her closer to the shore.

"All the better to distract a caveman," she quipped back with a roll of her eyes, treating his compliment like a weight she couldn't bear. But inwardly, she was fuming, and the last thing she needed was to admit that she enjoyed his attention—even as it made her skin tingle with anticipation.

"Nothing better than a pretty view to fuck myself to," he said in a deeper voice, shoulder bunching as he did exactly that. Fucked himself. "You're welcome to join me if you want. God only knows how desperate you were last night..." his voice trailed off as he tutted. "Bet your pretty pussy feels really left out."

Rhiannon swallowed hard, her eyes drawn to his reddening cock. Her focus did something to him, and Rhiannon's gaze flicked back to his when he let out a hard grunt, hips bucking against his grip. She could tell he was getting close, and even though her whole body throbbed in tune, and she shouldn't have been encouraging it, some wild part of her was begging to see more.

"Tighter," she told him, and Adrian's eyes turned half-lidded and lazy. It felt like staring at a panther, and her heart raced. The instruction was something so hazy that she wasn't even sure she'd said until he groaned loudly. She couldn't believe she'd even said anything... Thank god he didn't ask her to repeat herself.

"Like this?" he said instead, the words forced through clenched teeth as both of his hands settled on his cock and gripped it like she'd said. Tighter.

Her breath disappeared, and more groans seeped through his pinched lips as Rhiannon nodded. Her mouth watered as she watched more precum spew, and Adrian's fingers dragged it over his cock head, fisting and grunting as he fucked himself harder.

Staring at him, she wondered what he was imagining, and without even thinking, she licked her lips.

"FUCK!" Adrian shouted, his whole body bucking as his cock spat cum on the shower door between them, and when his back arched against the wall, Rhiannon felt her own body throb in tune. "FUCK!"

Her thighs clenched as he leaned against the wall, breathing hard. It took a minute, one where her ears rang, and her mouth felt dry, for her to realize that he was still stroking himself, almost like he was dragging it on, body shuddering as he watched her.

"Like I said, you're welcome to join." His words caressed her, and Rhiannon's nipples pebbled as she ached to do exactly that.

"No." She blinked, taking a step back. "No. I'm sorry, that was a mistake."

A devilish smirk curled his lips as he took in the sight of her, "No, Darling, that was fun. Let's do it again sometime."

His casual demeanor was infuriating, and it grated on Rhiannon's nerves. She huffed, turning her back to him, but his presence was like a magnet drawing her in. She could feel him watching her, piquing her curiosity, and the mix of emotions only intensified the silence that grew between them.

With determination, she forced herself to focus on her reflection in the mirror,

washing her face briskly as she tried to will away the flush still lingering on her cheeks. She resisted the temptation to glance at him again, reminding herself that she was here for a reason.

Yet, as Rhiannon started going through her routine, it became increasingly difficult to ignore him. She focused on brushing her hair, her heart drumming away as she made eye contact with him through the mirror. He wasn't even trying to hide his gaze; his eyes roamed her form, and she felt the scrutiny like a tangible weight. Every glance sent sparks of heat flaring through her body, leaving her breathless.

Rhiannon could only give him a glare through the mirror while inwardly berating herself for allowing frustration to fuel her attraction.

She busied herself with her toothpaste, splashing the cool water on her face again, hoping it would ease her rising temperature. Annoyance and desire twisted together in a tumultuous knot within her. Just when she thought she could escape the impossible tension between them, he had to go and do that.

Her whole body was on high alert as he left the shower, not bothering to wrap a towel around his waist before he joined her at the basin.

Inch by inch, he invaded her personal space, and the tension between them swirled, filling the room with unspoken allure. Rhiannon could sense the simmering lust beneath his teasing glances and posture, and it threatened to drown her. The brush of his body against hers sent electric currents cascading through her, awakening every nerve ending as she fought against her instincts.

A hand settled on her waist as he stopped behind her. It froze her in place. His touch was blistering as he stopped to drag in a breath. His whole body shuddered, and she nearly stepped back into his arms. She wanted to, so much. If she wasn't frozen, she knew she would've.

"You smell good," he murmured as he pressed a kiss to her neck, and before she could respond, he stepped back with an air of casual nonchalance, clearly enjoying the effect he had on her. "Just needed the soap," he murmured, leaning across her to grab a bar of soap that matched the same one she'd seen in the shower. As if he didn't even see the irritated glare she threw his way, he added, "Alina will be here later. You can let her know if there's anything specific you need from the store. Toiletries, clothes."

Her eyes narrowed further as he moved back toward the shower. The shower door closed behind him, and his eyes danced as he turned to face her again.

Who the fuck was Alina? Her hand gripped the bathroom counter behind her, squeezing tight enough to ache. Her father had his assistants, he wasn't shy about fucking them on the side and her mother never said anything. That was just what life was like in the mafia.

Fuck if she'd do the same.

"Stop playing games, Adrian," she called out, desperate to reaffirm her boundaries as her heart raced wildly under the surface, resolute in her decision to fight against the magnetic pull he had on her. "I shouldn't have run away yesterday," she amended when he raised an eyebrow at her. "But if you want us to do this thing together, then stop with the fucking games."

"Who says I'm playing?" he replied, stepping under the spray of water once more, a confident gleam in his eye that sent her heart into a wild dance. Yet, despite her resolve, there was still a burgeoning desire for the complications that came with being drawn to him, complexities that left her enraptured right down to her very core.

Rhiannon's heart raced, and the wetness glistening on his skin made it nearly impossible for her to look away. Each droplet traced over his defined muscles, the

steam rising around him creating an almost otherworldly aura that wrapped around her senses, stirring a mix of longing and frustration deep within. The growing tension in the bathroom was palpable, an electric current that had her second-guessing every instinct she'd brought with her—a heady intoxication she couldn't afford to indulge.

"Seriously," she said, forcing herself to maintain an air of defiance. "No more games, it's fucking exhausting." Then, after taking a breath, she stole his line from last night and hoped she managed to pull it off with the same mocking superiority he'd had. "You're better than that."

Adrian turned off the water, a smirk playing on his lips as he stepped out of the shower and reached for a towel. "You say 'exhausting,' I say 'entertaining.' It's a matter of perspective." He dried himself off casually, letting her watch him from the corner of her eye, the room thick with unsaid words and simmering attraction.

"Yeah, well, I never signed up for this." The defensiveness in her tone was stronger than her resolve, an attempt to shield herself from the undeniable chemistry that sparked between them.

Adrian draped the towel around his waist, and for the first time, Rhiannon didn't manage to suppress the shiver that ran through her. The tension clawing at her insides made it hard to breathe properly, each inhale trembling with unspent energy.

"Don't worry, Wife," he rumbled, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "I don't fuck unwilling women. But if you change your mind, just remember to say please."

"I won't," she snapped at his back, unable to resist the urge. Just like she couldn't resist adding, "And if I catch you with another woman, so fucking help me, I'll make you regret it."

Her whole body was bristling as he turned to face her with a cocky expression that

told her he thought he'd won. Rhiannon started to panic. That wasn't what—she hadn't meant it like that!

"It's nice to see you care," he teased, approaching her once more, and in her panic, she didn't even bother to step back like she normally wanted to. An arm wrapped around her waist possessively again, and she didn't—couldn't—stop him when he pulled her closer. Adrian dipped his head, stopping a hairsbreadth from her lips, his voice a low, cocky grumble that had her core tightening all over again. "Don't you worry, though, Baby. I can handle my urges just fine without a mistress."

He kissed her before she could sputter a retort, and her heart raced as she opened her mouth up for him.

"Adrian," she murmured, shaking her head as he let her go. Her body cooled far too quickly, and the disappointment she felt distracted her enough to leave her searching for words. "I—"

"Not until you beg, Princess," he teased, and before she could even think to say anything more, to defend herself or explain, he left without a backward glance. A good thing, at least, because it took her another few minutes to gather herself, and it took even longer to find that spark of indignation that Rhiannon knew she should've felt at being manhandled like that. Beg? As if.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:04 pm

Adrian stood in the kitchen, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee mixing with the subtle scent of spices wafting in from the nearby dining area. He leaned against the counter, trying to conceal the flicker of amusement that played at the corners of his mouth as he anticipated her entrance.

This really wasn't how he'd seen this morning going, but after he'd stepped into her warehouse to find her moaning his name under her breath, he'd been high-strung and on the edge. It was only made worse when he climbed into bed next to her and woke up to feel her snuggled up and burrowing into him, her warmth hardening his cock even when soft snores filtered through her mouth.

How the fuck she'd slept through that was baffling, but by the time dawn rose, he'd been forced to go to the bathroom to get rid of the ache in his balls.

His fingers scratched against the scruff on his jaw. He hadn't shaved, hadn't had the chance before she stumbled into the bathroom and caught him with his hand around his cock.

Satiated as he felt, his balls still tightened at the look on her face when she'd spotted him. That dewy glaze in her eyes as she glanced to where his hands were, then the way she'd told him to grip tighter and then licked her lips like she'd been imagining taking his cock into her mouth. Fuck, he'd exploded the second he realized.

He'd left her wet; he knew that. Call it cocky arrogance or simply the satisfaction of seeing her squeeze those pretty thighs, but he knew when he left that she'd been dripping and needy. Now, if only her mind could get on board with it all, too.

That's ultimately why he'd decided to give her a few moments to gather her thoughts, to let the adrenaline of their discussion wear off. In her frustration, she wouldn't stay away for long—she couldn't resist the pull between them. Adrian settled back into the chair, a subtle smirk crossing his lips as he thought about how stubbornly she fought against him, against the chemistry that crackled between them.

Their kiss just proved she wanted him, and that was enough. He could wait. His smirk grew, especially if it meant getting her to beg, just like he'd teased her with.

After all, the thrill of the chase only heightened the reward, and the fire that she brought into his life was a blaze he was more than willing to stoke. As he replayed the way her body had tensed and relaxed during their conversation, a part of him was already preparing for the moment when she would finally drop her guard. That moment would be worth the wait, and when it came, he would be ready to embrace her fully—mind, body, and soul.

Marching into the kitchen, Rhiannon glared at him, her expression flustered and fiery, and he couldn't help but admire her resolve. She locked eyes with him, her expression a mixture of determination and defiance as she declared, "You can go to hell."

Adrian hadn't been expecting anything less. Nonplussed, he responded with a teasing smirk, "Breakfast will be ready in a bit."

He knew Rhiannon was flustered by their confrontation, her emotions flying like confetti around them. It was a game they played—the push and pull of their exchanges, a dance that left both of them breathless. And somewhere beneath her fierce exterior, he felt there was an openness, a part of her that wanted to let him in, even if it was buried beneath layers of skepticism.

Following his lead, Rhiannon moved to the breakfast table and sat with a heavy thump, her expression marked with frustration. Adrian nearly grinned, and then,

unable to stop himself from teasing her, he leaned across the table and murmured, "I really thought you'd take longer, Gorgeous. You do know the shower has a detachable head, right?"

Her cheeks burned, and her glare would've scalded him if she really meant it. "Fuck. Off," she snapped, and he let out a low laugh, settling back in his seat. "Your kiss wasn't that good."

Adrian laughed. That wasn't true, he'd seen how close she was to giving in, but if she didn't want to admit it then he wasn't going to force her. He wanted her on her knees for him. No matter how long it took.

As the silence between them grew, he couldn't help but notice how keenly she observed everything around her, her eyes darting between the perfectly arranged plates and the bustling kitchen. Her attention turned to Alina, his trusted chef, when she entered with a flourish, carrying a beautifully plated assortment of breakfast items.

Rhiannon would eventually give in; he felt it in the way her defenses flickered when she was genuinely interested in what he had to say. There was a moment during their argument when her resolve had wavered, when her fierce gaze softened just enough for him to catch a glimpse of vulnerability before she brought her walls back up. It was those moments that ignited his anticipation; they were proof that beneath her bravado, there were emotions swirling just beneath the surface.

"Rhiannon, this is Alina," Adrian introduced, watching as the two exchanged polite nods, and while his wife's face might've been blank, he could've sworn he saw relief in her expression when she saw the rotund, older woman. He'd meant what he said, he didn't need another woman now that he was married to her. Especially when she'd basically proven he just needed to wait a little bit.

"She takes care of everything around here. Feel free to let her know your preferences." "Alina," he purred, winking at the older woman as she gave him a scolding glance. "Meet my wife."

The woman blinked but quickly found her feet. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Nikolai."

"Thank you," Rhiannon muttered, her face bright red as she stared at the assortment of food in front of them. "It's lovely to meet you too."

Once Alina excused herself to tend to the last of the meal preparations, Adrian felt the moment was finally right to discuss the ramifications of yesterday's events. He broached the topic lightly, hoping to gently ease them into a conversation that had been hanging over them.

"It's quite the place you have back there," he commented, a casual tone masking the seriousness of the situation.

Her scoff caught him off guard. "Well, not anymore."

Adrian raised an eyebrow, a smile tugging at his lips as their usual banter sparked to life. "That sounds like the opening line to a good story. Care to share?"

She rolled her eyes, but he could see the edges of a smirk trying to break through her facade of annoyance.

"I'm serious, Rhiannon. I'd be more than happy to have you included in the Bratva's dealings," he continued, steadying his tone. "In my family, the women aren't kept on the side unless they choose to be."

He could see he had her attention now; the slight tilt of her head indicated he was

getting through.

"That means you need to work with me," he pressed, leaning forward slightly over the table. "Not pull off things like last night, especially after one of your own men tried kidnapping you less than a week ago."

The energy in the room shifted. He could sense her resistance bubbling to the surface, her expression hardening.

"I need you to be less impulsive," he urged, trying to temper his words with understanding. "Give this union of ours a chance. Trust me," he murmured, adding, "Over time," when her brow furrowed.

Rhiannon's disgust was palpable as she shook her head, her voice laced with bitterness. "You can wrap it up however you want, Adrian, but in the end, you still want to do the same as the men in my family—control me and keep me chained. You're just nicer about it, which makes you just as horrible and manipulative as my father."

The impact of her words hit him like a punch to the gut as all the progress they'd made blew up in flames. He watched in silence as she pushed her chair back, the scrape against the floor echoing in the tense air. Rhiannon stood up, a whirlwind of defiance and hurt, and stormed out of the room.

Adrian let out a heavy sigh, running a hand through his hair in frustration. Maybe he shouldn't have pushed, but damn, she was stubborn. As he gazed at the empty chair across from him, he couldn't help but feel an unshakeable affection for her tenacity, her fire. Their constant verbal sparring was exhausting and invigorating—a dance of dominance he found intoxicating.

He knew he needed to tread lightly. Rhiannon was a force of nature, and while her

stubbornness often got under his skin, it was also a part of what drew him to her. As he contemplated how to bridge the growing divide between them, he realized that he had his work cut out for him. But he was up for the challenge; he just needed to find a way to reach her.

He could still feel the heat radiating from where she had just sat, the space between them charged with the remnants of their argument.

As he leaned back in his chair, he couldn't help but let out a frustrated chuckle. Rhiannon was a tempest of emotions, and today, she was at her most flustered—a whirlwind of passion and indignation that was both captivating and infuriating. The way her cheeks flushed with color, a deep shade of crimson that only flared more when she was riled up, only added to her allure.

He found himself utterly drawn to her fire, mesmerized by her spirit even as they clashed. He thought about how her eyes had sparked when she called him manipulative, how her words had cut deep yet stoked a fierce desire within him. This woman could dominate a room without even trying, and the very intensity that made her so adamant in their disagreements was the same quality that drew him in. He loved to see her fight back, loved that fierce glint in her eyes that spoke of strength.

Adrian took a deep breath, his mind drifting back to the moments before she had left. He could still see the way her hair had fallen around her shoulders, framing her face perfectly—the strands tousled in just the right way to enhance the wildness that danced in her spirit. The faint scent of her shampoo lingered in the air, mixing with the aroma of breakfast as he shifted in his seat, his body responding instinctively to the memories of her fiery presence.

She just needed time, he reminded himself. He could feel the tension crackling in the spaces between them. Each heated exchange only served to strengthen his attraction to her and thrill him with the possibility of what lay ahead. If only she could see that

he didn't want to control her—he wanted to stand beside her, to fight with and for her, not against her. But he needed to find a way to communicate that, to show her that the partnership he offered was built on mutual respect.

Standing up, Adrian moved to the door Rhiannon had exited from, contemplating how to approach her next. Her fiery spirit was intoxicating, and while he enjoyed their verbal sparring, he was equally eager to coax her into a place where they could find common ground.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:04 pm

Rhiannon pushed herself through the workout, sweat glistening on her skin as the rhythmic sound of her breathing filled the otherwise quiet gym. The state-of-the-art facility was impressive, but despite the luxury of the equipment and the space, she couldn't shake the feeling of being out of place. In the past few days since Adrian's manipulative proposal, she had done her best to avoid him in his home, spending as little time as possible in his presence.

As she practiced her kicks and punches, she found herself lost in thought, reminiscing about the days when she had a coach to guide her through her sessions and someone to spar with. The lack of interaction made her yearn for the camaraderie and competition she used to have at her regular gym. She was determined to resume her usual training there soon enough, but in the meantime, the solitude was weighing on her.

Living on her own had been quiet, but at least she'd had the freedom to escape outside whenever it became too much. It wasn't as easy to do that inside Adrian's home. Everywhere she went, she was forced to consider where he was, what he was doing, and where he was going—it was getting tiring.

Just as she was finishing her last round, she felt a shift in the air. Startled, she turned to find Adrian moving past her, his gaze fixed on the equipment as if he were about to train himself. She rolled her eyes, irritation bubbling beneath the surface. Really, of all the times he had to show up, it had to be now? She quickly redirected her focus, determined to ignore him.

"Need a partner, Princess?" he asked suddenly, breaking into her thoughts and challenging her as effortlessly as he always did.

She shot him a look of disbelief. "I don't think so."

The idea of sparring with him after everything felt ridiculous, but the truth was, a part of her found the notion inviting. He smirked, a glint of challenge lingering in his gaze as he looked her up and down.

"I don't see why not," he continued, slinging his gym bag over his shoulder. "I've seen you fight. It's pretty good. Besides, I figured we could both use the practice. Get rid of any lingering..." he trailed off on purpose, his mouth quirking into a grin. "tension."

Despite her annoyance, the allure of the challenge was enticing. Fighting with someone who could push her, really push her, exhilarated her in a way that her body craved. After several days of sharing a room together and many more interrupted or delayed orgasms, she was beyond frustrated. Before she could think better of it, she nodded. "Fine, but if I see you're taking it easy on me, then I'll make your life hell."

"I wouldn't dream of it," he purred, and the tension between them sparked as he joined her on the mat.

Shooting her a roguish grin, Adrian removed his gym shirt, and for a moment, the world around Rhiannon faded. Everything else—his charm, his audacity, and even their last conversation became forgotten. It was like she'd been drawn into a trance, one she'd easily blame on the lingering frustration she'd been feeling over the past few days, and her mouth watered.

Fuck me , she thought, this time with a little more clarity. Almost like she actually meant it, and with the way her pussy was throbbing, she actually might've.

"Don't tell me you're scared," Adrian taunted, his confidence radiating off him in waves. That cocky smile on his lips stirred an impulse deep within her, a desire to

rattle him, to throw him off his game, and maybe if she was thinking a bit clearer, she'd know whether or not he was playing with her.

Maybe she might even have realized he was.

Instead, Rhiannon felt a smirk form on her own lips. "Scared? Please, I'm not the one who needs practice."

She stretched her body slightly, leaning in just enough so he'd notice her toned legs and the way her tank top hugged her curves. She'd worked damn hard for this physique, and if she wanted to show it off, then she fucking would.

He raised an eyebrow, catching her drift. "Is that so?"

She took a deep breath, knowing she could exploit the simmering heat between them. "Stop playing with me, Adrian," she said, pushing boredom into her tone as she started to circle him. "I thought we agreed you wouldn't."

It was pure speculation at that point, the boredom something she didn't even feel as they circled each other, both of them falling into their rhythm. Initially, the sparring session felt bland, as if they were both testing the waters. But gradually, the heat began to build, and the air grew thick with a mixture of exertion and unacknowledged tension.

He was good.

He was really good, and soon enough, Rhiannon felt her lungs heaving for breath. She had to catch him off guard. Do something that would give her a better chance at winning.

With that, she tossed her hair over her shoulder dramatically and launched into the

next round of punches and kicks in an attempt to unbalance him. It seemed impossible. No matter what combination she used, he returned it with a casual ease that was bordering on swaggering.

The air was thick with challenge as they circled each other again, but Rhiannon was determined to spice it up. Drawing him in closer, she feigned a strike, then spun away, all the while gauging his reaction.

His eyes were glued to her, and she could see the momentary flicker of surprise on his face. That only fueled her confidence. "Come on, Adrian. Didn't you want a worthy opponent?" she teased, letting a playful laugh escape her lips.

He snorted but didn't take the bait. "I thought you said no games, Wife?"

That word always caught her off-guard, and it did then, but Rhiannon managed to save herself as she shot him a grin. "Game? No, Baby, this is sparring," she cooed, pushing her body forward as she lunged, aiming for his side. At the last moment, she pivoted and brushed against him, her hip pressed against his thigh in an accidental yet deliberate motion. She felt a jolt of electricity at the contact, and she could see he felt it too—the way his breath caught, his stance wavering ever so slightly.

"Nice try," he remarked, but there was a hint of breathlessness in his voice that told her she was getting under his skin. "But you'll have to do better than that."

"Oh, I will," she replied, her voice dripping with a playful inflection as she feigned another attack, pushing him back with a surprising burst of speed.

As they continued, Rhiannon's strategy unfolded like a plan that was all too intoxicating. She threw a few calculated kicks and feigned exhaustion, letting him think he had the upper hand. Each time she spun or ducked, she made sure to let their bodies brush against each other, letting the heat build with every contact. She could

see the way his muscles tensed, how his breath hitched in his throat each time they came too close for comfort.

"Focus, Rhiannon!" he warned, frustration and desire wrestling in his expression.

"Oh, I am focused," she murmured, giving him a sultry smile as they locked eyes for a moment, heat pooling in the space between them. If he could play games like that day in the bathroom, then so would she. This was all a game, and she was determined to win.

Adrian lunged, and she narrowly avoided his grasp, twisting her body to sidestep him. It felt thrilling, the way they became entwined, their movements a dance fueled by passion and competition. But she could tell he was beginning to lose his composure; his breaths were more labored as she led him further out of his zone—a slight sheen of sweat had formed on his brow that only added to his allure.

"Come on, follow my lead," she hissed, her voice full of playful challenge.

As they continued to spar, her movements became bolder—she slipped out of his grip and twisted around, letting her body brush against his in a calculated move that made them both acutely aware of the heat thrumming between them. Rhiannon's heart raced, knowing she was playing a dangerous game, but she couldn't help herself. The rush of adrenaline was intoxicating, and the way he seemed almost enchanted by her antics only egged her on.

"Is that all you've got?" she teased, letting out a breathy laugh as she ducked under his arm again. "Come on, Adrian. I thought I was supposed to be the one working hard here. Aren't you the big bad wolf of the Bratva?" she purred, arching an elegant eyebrow. "The Pakhan's guard dog... I really expected more, Husband."

His jaw tightened in determination, and she could practically feel the shift in energy

as he bore down on her. She sensed him drawing closer, but in a flash, she made her move. With a swift motion, she chose to play dirty once more, contorting her hips in a way that threw him off balance, almost as if she was humping him. Her pelvis brushed against his, and he was rock fucking hard. She hadn't been expecting that.

Blinking, she almost missed her chance, but he was too out of it to realize.

"Damn it, Rhiannon!" he groaned, barely able to keep his stance as she took advantage, pushing him backward until he lost ground.

She grinned triumphantly, reveling in her victory as she stepped away to catch her breath, grabbing her water bottle and feeling nothing short of victorious. But just as she turned to revel in her win, she quickly found herself confronted.

Adrian nudged her backward until she was cornered between him and the walls, and there was a dark, hungry look in his eyes as he stepped close enough that she could feel the heat radiating off him, his breath hot against her cheek.

"That was creative but dirty," he breathed, his voice low with a hint of amusement. The proximity had her heart racing, and she knew he could tell how affected she was.

Feigning ignorance, she shrugged, trying to keep her composure. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

The smirk on his face only aggravated him more. Without warning, he leaned in, blocking her in with his arms, the wall pressing against her back. One of his hands settled on her hip, and his thumb rubbed it softly, sending sparks shooting through her as she met his gaze with her own. The intensity pouring off of him left her breathless.

"Are you sure?" he asked softly, leaning closer toward her until all she could smell was that addictive scent of sweat and the soap that he preferred. "I know you were as

turned on as I am. In fact, Baby, I'd bet everything I have that you're wet for me right now."

A rush of heat flooded her cheeks as she gathered all her strength, haughtily rejecting his claim. "No, absolutely not," she shot back, though her voice trembled just a little too much.

His eyes darkened further, and in a movement that left her stunned, he closed the distance and took her mouth, licking the seam of it until she gasped. Then he thrust his tongue in, swallowing her moan, tasting her. It was fierce and passionate, a collision of frustration and longing that quickly escalated into something primal as he stepped between her legs, the thick, hard length of him pressing against her soft belly.

All her defenses melted away, and for a moment, she melted against him, consumed by the intensity of the kiss, of him, as he pressed against her until there was no longer any space dividing them.

Soft moans slipped through her mouth and into his, and when he finally pulled away, a smirk tugged at the corners of his mouth. "That's what I thought."

Before she could recover from the whirlwind of emotions, he added, "Come to my match tomorrow night."

Her heart raced, not just from the kiss but at the prospect of seeing him fight up close for the first time ever. The thrill of the upcoming match mixed with the remnants of their charged exchange, leaving her both excited and frustrated by the intoxicating mix of emotions. Damn it all, she had absolutely no idea how to navigate this fucking connection between them.

Rhiannon was still trying to catch her breath as she stared up at Adrian, a mix of defiance and desire swirling in her chest. The kiss had knocked her off balance, and

she could still taste him on her lips—a sharp reminder of how easily he could disarm her. She didn't want to overthink it, didn't want to analyze the tingling warmth that still radiated through her, but it was there, building an exhilarating tension that she could almost reach out and touch.

"Tomorrow night, huh?" she said, trying to sound casual, even as her heart raced at the thought of seeing him fight. She would not let him see how much this excited her, how every part of her craved to be close to him, and how that kiss had stirred something deep inside her.

"Mhmm," he purred, dropping his mouth to hers again, and this time, his kisses were slow and languid, and when he left, she was tempted to pull him back to her again. "Tomorrow night."

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:04 pm

Adrian's heart raced as he stood backstage, and he bounced on the balls of his feet, grinning wide as he considered the upcoming fight.

The pulsating energy of the crowd filtered through the curtains surrounding him. The air was thick with anticipation, the cacophony of cheering fans mingling with the adrenaline coursing through his veins.

His body was a machine that he had trained tirelessly just for this, but for the first time in a long time, it wasn't the match that held his full focus as he warmed up for the fight ahead. Adrian strapped on his gloves, his lips curving into a grin as he considered the previous day's sparring with his little wife.

His cock might've been hard as a fucking rock for over a week straight, but goddamn, it felt good having Rhiannon there with him. Just knowing that she was in the audience, waiting to watch him take on his opponent, lit a fire in him he refused to put out. Regardless of what she thought, Adrian couldn't help but think of her as his. And his fucking woman was waiting to see him put on a show tonight.

For the past few days, he'd watched her avoid him in his home, the atmosphere between them thick with unsaid words and unresolved tension after what he'd said, and for a little while, he was honestly worried he might've scared her off. Adrian didn't know how to admit it, least of all to himself, but at some point in the past few months, he'd genuinely started to care for her. And while he longed for more from her, he also knew that he'd had the advantage. He'd been watching her for months, getting to know her routine and nuances, while she'd only just entered his world and all the complications that came with it.

Even so, Rhiannon being there represented not just support, but the chance for her to witness a piece of the life they had in common with each other. He knew she'd been training in multiple martial arts since she was young, though it was only something he'd really learned about after seeing her fight those five or so months ago.

But more than even that, he wanted her to see that his family—his brothers and their women—were different from hers, that they took the word family like an oath rather than amusing themselves by bullying one another. His brothers were here, as well as their wives, and Adrian hoped she would bond with them. The women had been getting antsy with their new security measures, and the rest of his brothers had been hoping this would be seen as a power move. They could kill two birds with one stone, introduce the marriage alliance in a subtle way that would show the criminal underworld that they were growing stronger and no one could harm their women, and also allow the women to get to know each other in a place he knew his wife was comfortable in. Adrian wanted her to learn more about their dynamic, and ultimately see the lengths they would go to protect one another. And perhaps, just perhaps, she would begin to understand that Adrian wasn't just manipulating her but instead offering her a place in a world of loyalty, trust, and connection.

"Ready to go, Man?" Kostya called, stepping into the locker room with him.

"Fuck yes," Adrian breathed, following him back out, and when he stepped into the underground fighting ring, the crowd went fucking wild.

A familiar cocky grin lit up his face. It was his name they were calling, but he didn't hear the one woman he wanted to amongst the crowd. Withholding a frown, his eyes quickly sought out Rhiannon's figure amid the chaos, where she sat alongside his brothers and sisters-in-law, their smiling faces bolstering his resolve. He winked at her, his grin widening when she rolled her eyes, but he could see a smile breaking through as Mira playfully nudged her with a chuckle. And just like that, he felt invincible, like she was his fucking good luck charm or something.

As the announcer called his name, the anticipation within him coiled tighter—an electric thrill that coursed through his muscles. He relished in the crowd's reception, lifting his fists in salute, taking in the exaggerated gestures of excitement and support from those around him. Every shout, every cheer fueled his energy, and he could feel Rhiannon's gaze piercing through the din of the audience, hot and unwavering. That flicker of tension between them was palpable, and he thrived under its intensity.

But as soon as he faced his opponent, a towering brute with a known reputation for brute force, the atmosphere shifted. Adrian's heart raced, and a hint of doubt crept into his mind. This was a tough guy—the kind that could take a hit and give one back without blinking. Adrian had fought tougher opponents before, but there was something unnerving about the man who stepped into the ring, the way he cracked his knuckles and bore an expression that promised pain.

"Go Adrian! Woohoo!" A shout drew his attention, and just before the match began, he caught sight of Rhiannon again. She was leaning forward, her delicate hands clasped together, a mixture of mischief and eagerness etched upon her face. "You got this!"

Seeing he was looking at her, she winked at him, and in that moment, a swell of pride surged through him. He reminded himself that he had to fight not only for himself but for her.

The bell rang, and the world around him narrowed to just the two opponents in the ring. Adrian took a deep breath, centering himself as he prepared to engage. The crowd erupted in a roar as they exchanged their first blows, the satisfaction of every punch reverberating through his limbs. He couldn't afford to falter; the stakes were too high.

As the fight unfolded, Adrian grew aware of the adrenaline coursing through his veins, propelling him to keep moving, to keep his opponent guessing.

He darted around the ring, dodging a wild punch aimed at his head and quickly countering with a jab to the guy's ribs. The man grunted in pain, a nasty grin splitting his mouth, and Adrian could see the fire in the opponent's eyes—this one wasn't going to go down easily.

Between throws and grapples, he looked for Rhiannon's face in the audience, soaking in her encouragement. Her voice rang above the rest, his own personal cheerleader, and he nearly stumbled at the mental image of her in a short little high school uniform, cheering him on.

Blood rushed to his cock, all their teasing resulting in a hard-on that throbbed as he taunted his opponent.

In an attempt to distract himself and focus on the fight and not her, Adrian started teasing him with sharp remarks that had the crowd exploding in laughter.

"Come on, big guy! You can do better than that!" he barked, feeling the confidence radiate from him, satisfaction flooding his veins when the man across from him let out an animalistic snarl.

"I'm going to fucking kill you, Russian," he hissed, and the brute landed a few blows against him with increasing frequency.

"Maybe next time, Baby." Adrian winked, barking out a laugh as he jumped over a kick that would've swiped anyone with less experience on their ass. His opponent's strength was coupled with surprising speed, though, and Adrian started to realize this as the fight progressed.

Breath turning sharp, Adrian dodged multiple attacks, but a swing to his gut had his body lagging, and he started to take more hits than he'd anticipated, each one sending shockwaves through his body, pulling him further away from his game.

His breath labored with every controlled motion while the crowd became a blur, their cheers blending into an indistinguishable roar. But beneath the chaos, he could still hear Rhiannon's voice rising above, rooting for him with a fervor that made his pulse quicken.

"Come on, Adrian! You got this!" she shouted, the intensity in her voice fueling his determination. He felt the weight of her support, and as if her cheer had injected him with newfound energy, he pushed forward, rallying against the throbbing pain in his side.

The fight became a real contest of strength and spirit, and in the heat of it all, he taunted his opponent again. "You're going to have to do better than that if you want to take me down!"

The man snarled, a new fire igniting within him that made Adrian's heart thump with adrenaline. "Stop fucking pussy-footing around," the man snapped, swinging a meaty fist toward Adrian's jaw.

Relief flickered through Adrian when he dodged it; that would've definitely knocked him out. But as they clashed, the reality of the fight sank in deeper. Adrian found himself on the defensive, struggling to regain control. He felt the weight of the match pressing down on him, yet he could still sense Rhiannon's gaze. And with each escalation of their battle, he sought out her eyes, grounding himself in the intensity of her focus.

At one crucial moment, as Adrian sought to break away from a tightening hold, he heard it again—Rhiannon's voice, clear, powerful, and unwavering: "You got this,

Baby! Knock him out!"

The sound of her bloodthirsty encouragement—and that fucking nickname she'd been teasing him with all week—made his need for her grow.

He was so fucking done with the teasing and taunting. Done with the fight that was taking so long—and after spotting his wife flashing him a hungry, coy smile, Adrian felt a surge of energy that helped him end the match. Launching himself at his opponent and dodging another powerful swing that would have knocked him out cold, Adrian quickly countered, weaving in and out of strikes, pushing himself harder. The moments felt electric—the friction between them evident, but he didn't want to delay the ending anymore.

With each exchange, the fight turned more primal, their connection morphing into a battle of wills. Soon enough, Adrian seized the opportunity, using a feint to create an opening. He ducked low and spun, coming up with a strong left hook that landed squarely on his opponent's jaw. There was a satisfying crunch, and the weight behind his punch reverberated through Adrian's muscles.

As the guy staggered backward, Adrian felt a rush of excitement surge through him like an unrelenting tide. Cock throbbing painfully from the adrenaline, he fought to gain ground, hearing her voice cheering him along, clear and vibrant amidst the chaos. "Yes! That's it! Fuck him up for me!"

Yes, his thoughts echoed ferally and Adrian roared with determination, diving into the fight, their movements blurring into a series of punches and counters, each one landing more powerfully than the last. Yet there was something about the way Rhiannon urged him on—the way she championed him—that kept him focused. It was as if he could level the playing field with her fiery spirit backing him up.

But then, another hit connected against him, slightly stunning him, and he felt a jolt

of pain. Fuck. He couldn't afford to falter now. They danced around one another, and the heat of the moment caused adrenaline to spike through him, the sweat sticking his hair to his forehead.

Finally, they reached a pivotal point in the match. As Rhiannon shouted for him again, that intensity in her voice was everything he needed. In that instant of unadulterated connection, he unleashed one final blow—an undercut that knocked his opponent off balance, sending him crashing to the ground.

The crowd erupted in uproarious applause, and Adrian's heart was pounding in his chest as he stood victorious. He turned toward Rhiannon, spotting her ecstatic expression in the audience.

She was jumping up and down, clapping her hands, pride radiating from her in waves. Red-hot desire roared through him at seeing her. Tonight. He'd fucking make sure of it, but tonight she was going to be his, and he couldn't fucking wait to wrap her in his arms, to feel her body press against him.

Adrian exited the ring, adrenaline still surging through him as he thought about their earlier conversations and the thrill of their past encounters. He wanted nothing more than to rush back to her, but he could be patient. Either way, he knew she wasn't leaving their bed tomorrow until he heard her screaming his fucking name.

"Well done, you fucking champ!" Lev crowed as Adrian walked backstage and started undressing. "That's one for the books, little brother."

"Don't you fucking know it," Ivan agreed, slapping his brother on the shoulder. "Best performance you've given all year. You should see the money rolling in from the bets on that fight."

"They were good," Mikhail grumbled, but as they started to discuss business, Adrian's answers became monosyllable and quiet. All he could think about was Rhiannon and keeping his dick down enough that his brothers wouldn't distract him further with teasing when all he wanted was to get back to her and feel how hot he'd made her.

After their session yesterday, he knew she'd be wet and wanting. Had realized it when she was pulled into a conversation during the fight, her thighs squeezing so tight he could see it from where he was standing.

But all of that disappeared when Mikhail spoke again, replacing his thoughts of fucking with murder, "Rhiannon's father mentioned setting up a 'family' dinner—said it needs to happen ASAP." Fucking Irishman. God, why couldn't they just let it all go now that they married?

A flicker of annoyance coursed through Adrian. Their father-in-law had bypassed both him and Rhiannon, opting to go through Mikhail as if that made more sense. He controlled the strings from a distance, and Adrian didn't take kindly to that.

"I'll agree to it," he said, steeling his resolve. "But it's a power play, and it's one I intend to counter."

"Do what you think is best," Mikhail replied, and with another clap on his shoulder, his eldest brother left.

This was going to be a game, he decided. If her father thought he could pull strings, Adrian would show him just how wrong he was. He'd play the role, grin through the decorum, and let Rhiannon observe her father's ideologies while reinforcing his own sense of family and loyalty.

After a brief discussion, the rest of the brothers left to return to the table their women

were all supposed to be sitting at. Rhiannon wasn't there. Warning signals blared in his head as Adrian questioned Mira, and she grinned teasingly. "Don't worry, lover boy. She just went to the restroom."

By the look on her face, he might've affected her more than he thought, Adrian surmised, and with a sudden spark of inspiration, Adrian bid them all goodnight, mischief lighting up in his chest as he made his way toward the restroom.

Maybe she was waiting for him. His cock throbbed harder at the thought, and he strode down the darkened hallway, moments away from palming it.

If Rhiannon would allow it, he'd fuck her against the bathroom door before they got home. The location didn't matter for him to get her to scream.

But something at the end of the hallway had those thoughts hissing away as a darker part of him surged to the forefront of his mind, and Adrian's excitement quickly shifted to pure fucking wrath as he noticed Rhiannon just outside. She was standing there, looking absolutely stunning—with her hair cascading down her back in soft waves and her body exuding confidence in that snug outfit—but some fucking prick was walking behind her, and they were moving slowly, way too fucking slowly. More details flickered through his mind as his countenance grew cold, deadly. The bruise appearing on her cheekbone, how her whole body seemed locked and stiff, and the glimmer of tears in her eyes.

Another moment later, the hallway light flickered across the gleaming metal of a gun, and Adrian's gut twisted into a knot of fury and protectiveness. He might not have known who was threatening his wife, but the man had just signed his fucking death warrant.

All those feelings built up over the past few days boiled over as he stormed forward, a snarl on his face, Adrian pulled out his gun and shot him.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:04 pm

"Go, Adrian!" Rhiannon screamed, her whole body brimming with excitement as she jumped up and down.

Down below in the ring, her husband moved with powerful, controlled movements that left her imagining the dreams she'd had about him not so long ago. And what his body could do when it was situated right over hers.

Rhiannon had enough in her spank bank to last a decade, and she only wanted more. She had no idea how, but Adrian had somehow just known that this was her kind of night. From the moment she felt the pulse of the crowd, she knew it was her place. She had trained in martial arts and boxing since she was a little girl, and the blend of watching the fight unfold, combined with knowing how powerful a fighter he was, was almost perfection. Just thinking about the way he had sparred with her only yesterday sent a rush of adrenaline through her.

Rhiannon couldn't fucking wait until they got back to the house tonight. She sipped more from her drink and felt a rush of glee. Maybe she should've slowed down. She was a little tipsy, more than she'd ever allowed herself to be in this type of situation, but she'd been unable to refuse when Adrian's family actually seemed to treat her like an adult and not a child that they had to care for.

Adrian was the same, though. She couldn't help the smile that crept across her face as memories of their last session played back in her mind. The thought of that body—so strong and capable—tangled with hers—even if it was just while they were sparring. It was enough to ignite a fire that was hard to shake. She felt a sense of pride wash over her just knowing the man competing below was hers. Being here among the raucous crowd only magnified that emotion.

The night had turned out better than she ever imagined, and Rhiannon was running on a high unlike any other she'd ever experienced before.

His brothers and their wives had welcomed her with open arms, and their lively conversations made her feel at home in this new family dynamic. Laughter echoed around them as they shared stories, and Rhiannon genuinely enjoyed their company. She felt a warmth growing inside, realizing that within this crew, she had found a sense of camaraderie that was comforting.

As the match continued, Rhiannon had watched the guys interact with one another, playfully teasing and joking around, and a twinge of something unidentifiable settled in her stomach. She'd misjudged Adrian, and while she still didn't agree with how he'd gone along with the proposal or negotiated it in the first place, she could at least acknowledge that she'd misjudged him. Even if it had been manipulative, seeing his family interact was making her reconsider her assumptions about him. They appeared close-knit, loyal, and deeply connected—not what she had expected from the Bratva and nothing like her own family.

Thinking of her family, Rhiannon's happiness started to wear off. At home, things were often rough around the edges and filled with tradition layered with casual cruelty. It was a stark contrast to the warmth she was beginning to feel with Adrian's family, and it left her feeling slightly uncomfortable. Shaking it off, she focused on the room around her again. She refused to let them ruin tonight for her. Not when tonight she felt relaxed for the first time in forever.

Adrian's darkened gazes left her thighs clenching with need, and Rhiannon leaned forward in her seat, cheering for him instinctively as the atmosphere around them charged with electricity. And when he managed to slam a weighted blow on his opponent, knocking him back a few feet, Rhiannon was unable to stop herself from screaming in approval.

"Come on, Adrian! You got this!" Her voice mingled with the crowd's roar, and although she was aware of how it might inflate his ego, it felt amazing to express her support for him in that moment. "Fuck him up!"

Lost in her thoughts, Rhiannon felt elation wash through her, and strangely, in that moment she felt a flicker of the freedom she'd thought was lost. For the first time in a long while, she felt like she belonged—part of something larger than herself. But just as quickly as that feeling rushed in, a creeping sensation of unease began to build within her.

She couldn't shake the feeling that, despite this burgeoning sense of acceptance, she was still in the same position she'd always been in. Walking on eggshells around powerful men who couldn't see what she could do.

Those thoughts dimmed her excitement a little more, and after a few rounds, she excused herself to head to the restroom. The venue was energetic, but the bright lights and bustling noise began to feel too loud and more than a little oppressive.

Meanwhile, the restroom she hid in was small and a little grungy but thankfully quiet. More importantly, it was so fucking far away from all her obligations and responsibilities that she felt her breaths ease once again.

Thinking about it all from a business perspective, she knew if she removed her feelings from the equation then it really was just a business decision. And how could she blame him for that? That's how things work in their world. She always knew this was normal for other women, but she'd been living along the thought that it wouldn't ever happen to her, and now that it had... well it was just so different when it happened to her. All the memories of the women she'd seen in the same position held a new impact now, things she'd forgotten felt like it was an insult to her as a woman that they were happening to her now. And maybe that was wrong. Maybe she should've realized from the beginning what they were going through, but she'd always

assumed it would be different for her.

Rhiannon washed her hands under cool water, staring solemnly at the woman in the mirror. Matte lipstick had smudged slightly at the corners of her mouth, and she wiped it with a shaking finger. She didn't even know why she'd dressed up or put on makeup, but it felt like just another failed attempt at claiming control when she didn't have any at all.

Annoyed with where her thoughts had gone, Rhiannon strode toward the bathroom door only to stop when a chilling touch suddenly pressed against the left side of her neck. Rhiannon knew what a knife felt like.

Working on instinct, she threw herself back at her opponent and kicked him where it would hurt most. Right between the legs. Adrenaline rushed through her veins as her attacker let out a furious grunt that grew into a shout when she balled up her fist and slammed it into his chin.

She knew she had to act fast, but she'd misjudged her attacker, misjudged his strength, and her victory ended abruptly as he slammed his fist into her cheek. She hadn't even seen it coming. The hit stunned her and she dropped to the floor, terror turning her thoughts into static to accompany the buzzing in her ears.

"Fucking bitch," he spat, slamming his boots until her stomach. Rhiannon gagged, barely noticing as he pulled her to her feet. "Should've known you'd be difficult, you stupid Irish cunt."

Fury washed through her, tempered only when the knife bit into the skin of her neck again, cutting deeper. She could feel the blood it drew, dripping down her neck. It felt like a crawling sensation, not unlike when a bug walked over her skin. All her training disappeared as Rhiannon remembered the last time she'd been at another man's mercy; blurred memories and pure terror filtered through, and she froze.

"Don't you dare fucking move," a low, menacing voice commanded, sending shockwaves of fear coursing through her veins. "I wouldn't mind fucking gutting you right here, pretty, but I've got money on this."

"What money?" she whispered hoarsely.

"Wouldn't you like to know," he taunted, stale breath touching her cheek. "Doesn't really matter though, does it? You'll still be dead soon, anyhow. Maybe I should have fun while I can."

The unexpected threat paralyzed her, alongside the cold sensation that seemed to cut deeper with every passing second. She stood frozen, every instinct shouting for her to react, but knowing that one wrong move could lead to dire consequences.

"Let me go," she replied, her voice staying steady despite her nerves. "My husband will kill you if you don't." And strangely, she believed that.

A laugh echoed behind her. "Not your father, Princess?"

His use of Adrian's nickname stirred anger, distracting her from him mentioning her father. "Don't you dare call me that."

Only he could.

Another laugh answered her.

"Behave, Princess, and we'll see." The words were heavy, laden with an intention that made her stomach twist. He sounded familiar, but the memory slipped through intangible fingers. She swallowed hard, her heart pounding in her chest, but she held her ground, hoping something would click into place before they made it to the parking lot.

As she was ushered along, her mind was racing, desperately searching for a way out. Her surroundings blurred into a whirl of noise—a world filled with laughter and chaos, entirely unaware of the terror unfolding just a few feet away. The person guiding her pushed through the crowd, and she could feel the rough grip on her arm, the intensity of his hold serving to heighten her senses. The thought of Adrian waiting for her danced through her mind, and she wondered idly if he'd even care should anything happen to her.

Once they crossed into the dimly lit parking lot, her heart thudded with the understanding that this was it—now or never. She had to find a way to escape this situation, but just as she gathered her thoughts, she felt a sudden shift. In a heartbeat, before she could make her move, the guy stumbled backward and crumpled to the ground as a gunshot rang out like a thunderclap in the night.

Adrian stepped into view, a warrior's fierceness in his stormy gaze. Relief and gratitude surged through her as she exhaled the breath she had been holding, but it was laced with lingering fear. "Adrian," she whispered, moving toward him.

"Are you okay?" he demanded, his voice lower and rougher than she had ever heard it, and silent tears fell down her cheeks that she refused to acknowledge.

"I—I'm fine," she stammered, her heart racing as adrenaline surged through her veins, leaving her shaken. The sight of him filled her with warmth and safety, sending a flood of gratitude through her.

Concern lingered behind those stormy eyes, a protective intensity that threatened to boil over. "Come here."

Rhiannon moved without thinking, walking on shaky legs until she reached his side and Adrian grasped her by the jaw, checking the wound with stormy eyes. "I'm regretting killing that fucker so quickly," he growled, his words reigniting the fire

she'd been feeling earlier. Rhiannon almost wanted to ask him what he'd do to the man.

Swallowing those words, Rhiannon promised herself she would never again take for granted that feeling of safety and connection she felt with him. He'd said himself he'd never take an unwilling woman, and even though they'd been sharing a bedroom all this time, he hadn't made a single move toward her.

She glanced up at Adrian, his face still set in a fierce expression, the tension humming in the air around them. Yet, even amidst the chaos, there was an undeniable connection that drew her to him.

His finger dragging across the line of her jaw, Adrian turned to look into her eyes, his stormy gaze searching her face with an intensity that made her heart race. "Promise you're fine, Princess?" His voice was low, laced with concern, as he studied her eyes for any hint of distress. She caught a fleeting glimpse of possessiveness behind his fierce exterior, and it made her feel cherished, wrapped in warmth amidst the lingering fear.

"I am," she replied, her voice steady despite the whirlwind of emotions. "Thanks to you."

His grip tightened slightly as he leaned in closer, his forehead almost touching hers. The world around them faded into insignificance, and for the first time that night, she felt a deep sense of tranquility settle within her.

"I'd never forgive myself if something happened to you," he murmured, and there was a rawness to his words that resonated with her soul.

Before she could respond, he closed the distance between them, capturing her lips with his in a gentle kiss that had Rhiannon melting into him, instinctively wrapping

her arms around his neck, deepening their connection as they surrendered to the moment.

His body was taut with tension, every muscle coiled beneath her fingertips, yet there was an undeniable softness in the way he kissed her. And when they pulled away, breathless and wide-eyed, the air crackled with unspoken words. Rhiannon searched his gaze, surrendering to the emotions swirling within her.

"Adrian..." she started, but he silenced her with a gentle touch on her lips.

"Later," he answered her with another soft kiss before he tore himself away.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:04 pm

Looking at the guy who held a knife against his wife's neck, Adrian couldn't help but wish he'd made his death last longer. Rhiannon had been much too close to danger for his liking.

Crouching down, he pulled the bandana off the guy's face, revealing a stranger's features that were as unrecognizable as the grim situation they found themselves in. Flicking a glance at Rhiannon, he could see she didn't recognize him either as her brow furrowed in confusion and concern. She stood just a few feet away, lips bruised and eyes hazy but slowly growing more alert as the adrenaline left her system.

"Fuck," he muttered under his breath. He couldn't shake the anger boiling beneath the surface. Someone had dared to threaten his wife, again —the thought alone sent a surge of protective instincts coursing through him. Pulling his phone from his pocket, he called Viktor and didn't even bother to greet him as he stood up and kicked the body.

"I just shot a man in the tunnels near the Pits bathrooms. Motherfucker tried to kidnap Rhiannon."

"What do you need?" Viktor asked, his voice devoid of any of his normal humor.

Sneering at the body again, Adrian answered him. "Get someone to clean the mess up, and get my wife a team to watch over her. I want at least two guards on her at all times," he ordered, his voice clipped. She should've had guards anyway; all of the other wives had them, but he'd fucking forgotten to arrange it, and that sat on his chest like a fucking weight. "I'll update Mikhail. He'll want to up the security on the rest of the women as well."

Adrian hung up the call and turned to Rhiannon, seeing the fire flickering in her gaze as she started to voice her objection, that clever mind of hers already working to persuade him not to do it. Irritation flared under his skin, but he buried it deep. She'd learn soon, he didn't let anyone fuck with what was his.

"Adrian, I didn't—" she started, her tone so fucking stubborn and irritated.

"Stop," he cut her off, his anger at the situation riding the frustration he felt at her arguing about her own fucking safety. "If you had guards with you tonight, this wouldn't have happened."

"But—"

"No," he interrupted, stepping toward her again. "This is as much an insult to my security as it is to you. Someone tried to kidnap my fucking wife. I'm not going to let that slide, Princess."

Her resolve wavered, and she let it go, disappointment shadowing her features. Relief flooded through him. He didn't want to argue with her right now. As fun as it was every other time, he refused to argue about her safety. That was one thing that he couldn't fucking do.

The reality was that her life was in danger, and he had a feeling this had something to do with that same fucking threat she'd had before they got married. As much as he enjoyed her fire and stubbornness, he wouldn't let her endanger herself because of some silly need to prove herself. He already knew she was strong and capable. She just needed to see that.

"Come on, we're leaving." Adrian took her hand firmly, the heat of his grip a grounding force, and led her toward his car.

After making sure she was comfortable, Adrian licked a finger and stroked the bloodied skin near her neck. It came away cleaner, the cut not deep enough to be a problem, but it still felt like a fucking offense to him.

He should've made that fucker suffer.

Closing the door, Adrian walked around the car and got into the front seat, feeling his wife's eyes on him the entire time. He didn't have anything to say, not when anger still flickered beneath his skin.

The fight might've helped ease the sexual tension he'd been feeling all week, but it didn't do shit for this.

Starting the car, Adrian let the powerful vibrations of his Camaro ease through him. Any other day, he'd race home, but he refused to put Rhiannon's life on the line. Things were easier when it was just him, and he could've given in to the impulses driving him.

Not now, though.

Revving again, he steered the car out of the car park and onto the highway. The drive was filled with a comfortable silence, but underneath it, an undercurrent of tension remained. It was a silent acknowledgment of what had just transpired and the need to address the elephant in the room. After a moment, he finally broke the stillness, needing something to distract himself from everything. His fingers clenched around the steering wheel, barely easing as he turned to look at Rhiannon.

She was still watching him, a strange look on her face as she took him in. He wasn't sure if he wanted to know what she was thinking right then.

"Your father called," he said, trying to keep his tone neutral.

At the mention of her father, Rhiannon's expression darkened, her annoyance palpable. Guess she was still angry about the wedding, he thought with a twist of his lips.

"What did he want?" she asked, eyebrows knitting together.

"He wants to set up a meeting," Adrian replied, keeping his attention on the road ahead.

"Great," Rhiannon huffed. "Just what I need—my father wanting to announce our 'alliance' after what just happened tonight." Her bitterness was evident, tinged with the frustration of familial obligations weighing down on her.

"It isn't the best time for an announcement, especially not after what happened with our own man," he agreed, feeling the same irritation bubbling inside him. "And not after tonight's events."

She let out a harsh laugh, a mix of disbelief and anger. "He wouldn't give a shit. To him, our family troubles are secondary to his status upgrade. Who cares if someone just tried to kill me?" There was a bit of hurt in her voice that had him reaching over the console to grab her thigh, and he squeezed it softly, hoping to convey that she wasn't alone in her frustration.

"Don't worry, Baby; you've got a Nikolai on your side now," he smirked, trying to lighten the mood just a little, but he could feel the gravity of the moment still hanging around them.

They drove in silence for a few moments, and Adrian couldn't help but feel acutely aware of Rhiannon's tension next to him. Her irritation was evident, simmering just below the surface. The darkness of their surroundings seemed to mirror the storm brewing in her head. He had no doubt his beautiful, smart little wife was plotting

something, and he couldn't fucking wait to see what she had planned for her father.

"He probably wants to discuss our next move in securing this alliance," Rhiannon said, frustration coloring her voice as she turned toward him. "And we both know that means he's pushing for us to have a baby soon."

There was something in her tone that told him she wasn't ready for that yet, and Adrian nearly grimaced because he knew exactly what she meant about her father's intentions. Fuck, he should've thought a little harder when Lucien made that demand.

"Is that what you want?" he couldn't help but ask; a part of him had to confirm even though he knew the answer wouldn't help him at all.

"Doesn't matter what I want," she sighed heavily. "If that's what was agreed, then that's what's going to happen."

"Your father doesn't own me, Princess. Regardless of what he thinks, I can always find a way around it."

"I'll have to have a baby eventually," she replied smartly, and he frowned again, needing to ask even though he already had an idea of what the answer would be.

"Even if your life's at risk?"

"Like I said, it doesn't really change anything."

Adrian's brow furrowed at the implication. It sounded all too convenient for her father, another way to manipulate the situation to his advantage. "You really think he'd pull something like that right after someone tried to kill you?"

Lucien had gotten what he wanted, regardless of the baby. That was just to ensure he

kept it.

"It wouldn't surprise me," she retaliated, shooting him an annoyed glare before it softened. "Look, I'm sure your family is different. Hell, what I saw of them tonight definitely was, but mine isn't like that, and Dad will just see this as an opportunity to make sure his bargain with you is fully in place before something happens to me."

Adrian's grip tightened on the steering wheel. "Remember what I said, Baby. You're mine now, and that means you've got a hell of a lot of power. If you're still planning to stay," he gave her a hard look that she returned without flinching. He knew she must've been planning it at some point. A woman like her wouldn't back down like that.

They were both simmering but in different ways. Adrian's anger stemmed from wanting to protect her and his deep-seated irritation at the threats against her life, while Rhiannon's frustration was directed inward—how her father's expectations and manipulations always seemed to overshadow her needs. He hadn't even considered how his father-in-law might react about this, but even if he had, getting her pregnant just to seal the deal wasn't something that would've crossed his mind, and it left Adrian with a slimy feeling in his chest.

Yes, the thought of fucking his wife until her body grew heavy with his child left Adrian feeling high most of the time, but not for these reasons. He wanted Rhiannon pregnant and fucking happy, not chained to him just because she was waiting to have a baby—and sure as hell not having a baby just for her to die afterward. Just the thought left him simmering.

No wonder she wanted to leave him so badly.

"I'm not going to run away," she finally answered, and relief flooded him as a smirk lit up his lips. She could've chosen to stay silent. It wouldn't have cost her a thing, but

Rhiannon might've been impulsive and brash, but he could tell when she was lying, and right then, he knew she meant it when she said she wouldn't run. Maybe it made him a fool, but he believed her this time. That lit a fire in him. Rhiannon might have his name, but for the first time, it actually felt like she was fucking his.

"Good girl."

Eventually, they arrived home, and as Adrian parked the car, he felt a sense of determination settle within him. They were in this together, and they would face whatever challenges lay ahead—preferably as a united front.

Later that night, after they had both gotten ready for bed, an unspoken truce settled over them. Rhiannon climbed into bed, inching closer to him than she ever had before. It felt almost monumental, this simple act of proximity. She nestled against him, her warmth a comforting presence.

"Thanks for tonight," she murmured, looking up at him with a mix of gratitude and vulnerability that made his heartache. Instead of responding with words, Adrian leaned down and pressed a soft kiss to her forehead, soaking in the intimacy of the moment and the warmth of her body as she fell asleep against him.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:04 pm

Rhiannon wasn't going to dwell on last night. Sure, the near-kidnapping had been terrifying, but the memory of Adrian's face—all furious intensity and then that unexpected tenderness—was way more pressing. And the way she'd woken up cuddled against him, his warmth a comforting weight... She shuddered, pushing the thoughts aside. Last night was over, done. Today was about family and the looming dinner at her father's place. She wasn't letting anything get her off track.

She'd spent hours getting ready, picking a dress that hugged her curves without being too tight, and doing her makeup in an edgy but not over-the-top way. Her heels were killer, the kind that could be used on her brothers' feet if they got too cocky. They'd be there, of course. Dad made sure of it. His precious sons were always eager to soak up the attention and learn the ropes of running the family business.

A wave of bitterness washed over her. The carefully crafted calm she'd built up threatened to crack.

This whole charade—the near-kidnapping, the forced marriage—felt like one giant, messy betrayal, and for the first time, she actually had the chance to breathe through the echo of that sharp pain in her chest.

Rhiannon's fingers touched and rubbed at the area. No matter how today went, she couldn't forgive him. Her father had used her, plain and simple. She'd spent years craving his approval, trying to prove herself worthy, and he'd tossed her into this alliance like a piece of meat. The anxiety gnawed at her, but she wouldn't let it show. Not today. They wanted a mafia wife, and She took a deep breath and headed downstairs.

Adrian was in the living room, looking sharp as hell in one of his expensive suits. One hand was pressed to his chest, the other fiddling with his watch. Her breath hitched. Damn. This was the guy she'd sparred with, shared a bed with—hell, she'd even walked in on him jacking off—and here he was, all polished and proper in a three-piece suit. A giddy wave of something—was it excitement?—washed over her. She knew what was hidden beneath that suit: the tattoos, the muscles, the raw, untamed passion. Her legs instinctively pressed together. She was annoyed with herself, annoyed that the sight of him still had this effect.

"Wow," he said, his gaze sweeping over her, a cocky grin playing on his lips. "You clean up nicely."

"Thanks," she mumbled, heat rising in her cheeks. She hated admitting it, but damn, he cleaned up nicely too.

Adrian's grin widened, a mischievous glint in his eyes. "Why do I get the feeling you're looking for an excuse to stay home?" he teased.

The casual way he called his place "home" sent a jolt through her. It was starting to feel like home, even though the reasons behind that feeling were definitely not what he thought. She wasn't ready to admit it, not yet.

"I'm not," she said, a small smile playing on her lips. It was a lie, but he didn't need to know that. "Thank you for the compliment, though. I was worried this dress might be a bit much."

His eyes lingered on her, hungry. "Never," he murmured, leaning in to press a soft, lingering kiss behind her ear. The unexpected touch sent a jolt of heat through her, a surprising jolt of something undeniably sensual. "You'd look good in anything, Baby girl."

She shivered. What the hell was happening? Their dynamic had shifted inexplicably. One minute, they were sparring rivals; the next... this. The seductive intensity of his touch, the undeniable shift in their energy... Could this possibly be... feelings ?

He offered her his arm, a small smile playing on his lips. "Come on, let's get this show on the road."

As they walked to the car, her mind raced, thoughts swirling. The impending dinner, the alliance announcement... It was all so much, so overwhelming. But as she felt Adrian's arm around her waist, a strange sense of anticipation replaced the fear. She was standing next to Adrian Nikolai. His ring was on her finger. She was married to the Bratva. And she had never felt more satisfaction than having the knowledge that she'd married a trained killer.

The lavish dining room buzzed with the low hum of conversation, the clinking of glasses a counterpoint to the nervous energy that thrummed beneath the surface. Adrian's hand settled on Rhiannon's thigh, the familiar touch sending a shiver down her spine as she smiled at all the congratulatory murmurs. Everyone had been surprised to see him there with her, his arm around her, but they'd taken one look at the ring on her finger, and the rumors had started to spread.

It was exactly what her father wanted, Rhiannon mused to herself. A show of power, subtle but forceful. No fucking way would anyone question him now.

On Adrian's other side, her father stood up from his chair in preparation for the speech Rhiannon already knew was coming. Her family was carefully seated all around her—another show for her father, and even though she'd already been anticipating it, Rhiannon felt the familiar dread settle in her gut as she wrapped her hand around the round globe of her wine glass. Adrian, though, seemed to have a

different plan. He smoothly cut her father off before he could even start his speech.

"Lucien," Adrian began, his tone low and chilling, the ice she'd witnessed in him before suddenly presenting itself in the gleam of his eyes. The look on his face was deadly, and he got a few questioning stares, although they kept their conversation quiet.

"I don't think now's the time for an announcement."

Lucien—her father—gave him a bland look, his own voice low and dangerous. "And why's that?"

Adrian didn't flinch. "I really thought we'd have a chance to discuss things first. The attack on your daughter, for one."

"Rhiannon," her father boomed, his voice ringing with authority, "Do you have any concerns I need to address?"

He didn't really care if she did, Rhiannon thought with a grimace. "Of course not, Dad," Rhiannon replied, her voice perfectly calm, even though her insides were screaming. The words felt hollow, like a lie, but she'd play the part. She'd play it flawlessly, unable to fight back now that she'd seen what her father really thought of her.

Adrian gave her a reassuring look, and she returned it with a fleeting smile that only made him frown further. "I think it's too soon for an announcement," Adrian said, his voice firm, his gaze unwavering. "Given the circumstances, we should perhaps reconsider the timing. It might send the wrong message."

Lucien's brow furrowed, his irritation clear. "This is about power and unity. You shouldn't let emotions cloud your judgment."

"I never said emotions are part of this," Adrian countered, his voice steady. "However, Rhiannon's safety comes first. This isn't just a business deal; it's her life."

"Family legacy matters too," her father insisted, crossing his arms. "You both need to think bigger."

Her brothers supported their father, nodding in agreement, but Rhiannon took note of Adrian's unwavering stance.

"Respectfully, it's not just about legacy; it's about ensuring that we're on solid ground before making such a public declaration," Adrian stated, his defense of Rhiannon firm and unwavering.

"I don't want to hear this again!" Lucien snapped, his frustration building. "The whole point of this dinner was to announce the alliance. The strength of this union will be a political benefit I'm not willing to ignore. That means announcing the alliance, not hiding in fear."

"Rhiannon's safety is my priority, and that should matter here," Adrian continued, his tone resolute.

"Enough! We'll discuss this later," her father barked, effectively shutting down the argument.

"We definitely will," Adrian replied, his voice cutting through the relaxed atmosphere.

Her father waved it off with a dismissive flick of his hand, the movement casual. Rhiannon knew better; he hated being interrupted, hated being challenged. Before either of them could press the issue, Lucien turned to the waiting guests.

"As I'm sure you're all aware," he announced, his voice booming, "we've recently formed an alliance with the Nikolai Bratva." He paused for dramatic effect, his gaze sweeping across the room, and Rhiannon turned to Adrian, noting how calm he was. She wasn't sure if that made her more worried for him or for what he'd do.

Her husband shifted to give her a smile, dropping a soft kiss on her lips that left Rhiannon blinking as her father continued with his speech. "And while that happened without much fanfare, the next bit might come as a surprise. Most of you would've probably guessed what the agreement entailed, so please allow me the pleasure of introducing my daughter and her new husband, Adrian and Rhiannon Nikolai."

A wave of polite applause washed over the room, but Rhiannon felt anything but polite. It was like a dagger to her heart, the way her father had so casually announced her marriage, reducing it to a mere business deal. And she knew it was one, she really did, but it didn't stop the insult from piercing her like a shard of glass.

Adrian shot her a quick, concerned glance, but she didn't react. She'd play this game, play it perfectly. A thin smile danced on her lips.

Later that evening, Rhiannon found herself lingering in a hallway just to get a break from all the questions and welcoming hugs. No one really meant what they were saying; they were just using this for the chance it was to get information. The families weren't happy with her father's scheming—neither was she, but Rhiannon knew better than to think there wouldn't be some form of retribution for this "political move", as her father called it.

He'd gotten so arrogant in his dealings that he'd forgotten the biggest thing, which was that power brought enemies closer, especially those you might've considered allies. And yes, they might've been wary about the new alliance her father had forged,

but that didn't mean anything if her husband wasn't as easy to control as her father attempted to show. And he wasn't. Adrian Nikolai wasn't a man who could be controlled by men like her father; even his own brothers had a healthy respect for the reputation he'd built. Then again, they seemed to have a healthy respect for each other all around, nothing like her father's fucking social games.

Rhiannon leaned against the wall, lost in her thoughts until the slow drawl of her brothers' voices left her steeling herself.

"Little sister," Ash purred, striding down the hallway toward her and sure enough, just as she predicted, they launched into their tirade. "It's been so long... how's life with a brute been?"

"Good, why?" Her eyebrow rose elegantly. "Jealous?"

Irritation flickered across the twins' gazes, and Cian smirked, "I'd rather not get fucked by someone who might have some form of new STD."

"Regardless," Ash replied in a low voice. "I'm surprised he hasn't knocked you up. You've always been good at spreading your legs. What's one more brute to add to your bedpost?"

Her teeth gritted. The things they said... It was easier for her to just ignore it all, and normally she did, but something inside her flared with irritation at their blatant dismissal of Adrian. He was three times the man any of them were, but before she could even respond, Adrian's presence filled the hallway, and he stepped in front of her, shielding her from her brothers.

"If you have something to say to either me or my wife, then feel free to say it to my face," he growled, his tone fierce and protective. "Otherwise, back the fuck off, I'm sure your father wouldn't want to know you're upsetting his precious alliance."

The change in his demeanor left Rhiannon utterly shell-shocked. Hot and bothered by the sheer intensity of his defense, she felt her cheeks flush. There was something undeniably thrilling about being defended so vigorously, but she also knew that this was his duty—to protect her image and stand up for her.

Identical sneers flickered over her brothers' faces. "Do you really think you have any power in this arrangement?" Ash scoffed. "You don't know our family."

"I don't need to know your family to know how to treat a woman right," Adrian shot back, glaring at him. "Rhiannon is my wife, and she deserves better than your cheap shots. Now scram before I get your handler to pull on your leash."

"Don't get so uptight," Cian replied, crossing his arms defiantly. "We were just teasing her. Weren't we, Rhi-rhi?"

Rhiannon bit back a retort as Adrian settled his arm around her waist. She'd let him handle it; he seemed to get on their nerves more than she normally did.

"Everyone can handle some teasing, but there's a line," Adrian replied, unwavering. "And you crossed it miles ago."

"Lighten up," Ash snorted. "It was a joke."

"And I'll be sure to explain that when my bullets are in your head," her husband drawled, and for the first time, Rhiannon noticed the gun he was holding in a relaxed grip by her waist. Her whole body shivered, heat flickering low in her belly as his thumb caressed her hip casually.

Rhiannon felt a warm rush of warmth flood through her. Adrian had stood up for her, something she had been yearning for someone to do but had stopped expecting long ago, having learned the hard way that no one gave a shit unless you had something

they wanted. Hearing him defend her so fiercely erased a bit of the helplessness that came with her family's treatment.

"Can we just—" her older brother began, but Adrian cut him off.

"You'll treat my wife with the respect she deserves, or you'll deal with me," he finished, the finality in his voice leaving no room for negotiation.

Rhiannon's heart swelled. The way Adrian defended her was nothing short of intoxicating. This was a man who would not only fight for her but also beside her.

As her brothers retreated, begrudgingly accepting his stance, Rhiannon assessed the situation with renewed clarity. She stepped closer to Adrian, her expression one of gratitude and admiration. She owed him a kiss. Hell, she owed him a blowjob after all that.

"That was... incredible," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Adrian turned to her, the corners of his mouth lifting in a slight smile. "I meant every word, Rhiannon. You deserve better than them. Always."

Oh, she definitely owed him a blowjob when they got back to the apartment. Desire fizzled in her blood, growing more and more as the evening continued, to the point where Rhiannon felt herself squirming as she listened to Adrian defend her over and over again.

When they finally left and returned to the apartment, she watched him remove his suit jacket and throw it onto the couch, a disgusted look on his face as he said, "Shit, and I thought my family was insane."

And Rhiannon couldn't help herself. So, with a body flush with arousal, she pounced

on Adrian, wrapping her legs around his waist as she pulled his head toward hers for a kiss.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:04 pm

The drive home was tense for Adrian as he remembered the words spoken that evening. His lips tightened, the taste of his disdain still fresh. Rhiannon's family—their dismissive attitude, the way they belittled her—made his blood boil.

He had seen the look in their eyes, the arrogance, like they were entitled to judge Rhiannon, to question her worth simply because she was a woman. It sickened him. How could they not see the strength in her? They reduced her to a pawn in their game, and the betrayal of it all clawed at him.

Her own brothers had taunted her with crude jokes, sending flashes of rage through his body—as if she wasn't anything more than a womb to be bred.

He clenched his fists and remembered how Rhiannon had gritted her teeth, fighting to keep her composure. She was tougher than they could ever comprehend, and yet they continued to push her, to belittle her, believing their superiority meant everything.

Adrian let out a slow breath, shaking his head. He had never been one for family dynamics—his own had been rife with shadows and threats—but this... this was a different level of toxicity. The sheer audacity of her brothers, the entitlement of her family. It was infuriating.

As he replayed the night in his head, Adrian started to understand the responsibility Mikhail had tried to explain about marriage and that, in taking her as his wife, he wasn't just married to Rhiannon; he'd taken on an obligation to protect her, and that meant her feelings as well. That those people had treated her like that, with such disrespect—it ignited a fierce determination within him. Those scornful looks, the laughs at her expense—he wouldn't stand for it. He'd show her family that respect

wasn't given freely; it was earned. He just had to be careful how he did it.

Regardless, he planned to have them change the ways they spoke to her. The next fucking family meeting her father called wouldn't end with his wife hiding in hallways to escape everyone's callous words.

They'd called him a fucking brute, and he nearly snorted. The very same people treating their own sister like shit had called him a brute.

Fucking assholes.

He ran a hand through his hair, finally directing his mind back to Rhiannon. How she had looked at him, those eyes glimmering with something—gratitude, relief, even a hint of desire. It unsettled him. She shouldn't have to feel grateful that he was treating her like a human.

The apartment door slammed shut behind him, jarring him from his thoughts. Adrian blinked back the haze, removing his jacket and tossing it onto the couch with a dismissive scoff. "Shit, and I thought my family was insane."

Before he could process anything further, Rhiannon was upon him, her lips finding his with a fierce urgency that sent a jolt of pure, unadulterated need straight through him.

Fuck , he hissed a curse into her mouth as her warm body pressed against him, igniting a fire in his already ramped-up desire.

Her arms wrapped around his neck, pulling him closer as she pressed against him with desperate hunger, a need that mirrored his own. Something more than lust—but he wasn't arrogant enough to assume it was love.

Rhiannon's mouth opened, her tongue exploring his with feverish urgency. He responded instinctively, his hands moving to her waist, tightening his grip as he savored the feel of her body pressed against his. The scent of her perfume layered with the lingering hint of sweat was intoxicating. Her breath hitched, a low moan escaping her lips as he deepened the kiss, their tongues entwining in a fierce dance.

He shifted his grip, hands moving lower to cup her ass, feeling the firm muscle beneath the soft fabric of her dress. A low groan erupted from his chest—half pleasure, half primal need. He tilted his head, deepening the kiss, lips trailing to the sensitive skin of her neck, feeling her arch against him.

"Adrian," Rhiannon pleaded, urgency lacing her voice as she grasped at his shirt.

"Fuck," he exclaimed, body jolting as she ripped at his button fly, pulling it down. "What are you doing, Baby?"

Lust clouded his thoughts while she breathlessly responded, "Rewarding you." Her delicate hands gripped his length, pulling him out into the light and exposing the throbbing evidence of his desire.

Precum beaded on his tip, and her eyes focused on it with a hunger that made him breathless. When she took him into her mouth, he bucked, swearing as her soft warmth enveloped him, every sensation heightened.

"For what?" Adrian managed to choke out.

"For standing up for me," she pulled away to whisper, and if the apartment hadn't been as silent as it was, he would've almost missed the words. "And for believing in me."

"You don't have to do this," he managed through gritted teeth, even as his mind

screamed for her to continue. "You don't need to reward me for standing up for you."

She swallowed his dick again and all the frustration he'd been feeling made it impossible for him to do anything to stop her now.

Her whimpers vibrated around him, driving him wild, and he leaned against the back of the couch, unable to push her away. The soft, slurping sounds filled the air, mixing with his groans, heightened by the pressure in his body, and he whispered her name as she took him deeper.

"Rhiannon," he urged, voice rough and low, barely holding on to control.

She pulled away just enough to murmur, "Please, I want to."

Hell, he could never say no to her, not like this. His whole body trembled as she flicked her tongue against the sensitive head of his cock. Her movements were teasing and gentle like she was enjoying herself, enjoying what she was doing to him. Darkness clouded his vision, and Adrian's shoulders tensed as he tugged a little harder at her hair. The teasing gnawed at him, and the release was close, entangled with her skilled mouth.

"Stop fucking teasing me. Suck my cock like you mean it," he growled, raw need clawing at him. If she was going to do this, then he wanted her to do it properly. He wanted to feel the warm silk of her mouth tightening against his cock until he couldn't even think. As if that was all she wanted, him on his knees for her.

He'd do that—bend down on his knees and kneel for his Princess, but only if she did first.

As if she could hear his thoughts, Rhiannon moaned, hollowing her cheeks as she swallowed him whole. The sensation had Adrian gasping, his sensitive head nudging

the back of her throat, driving him to the edge. His eyes nearly rolled back into his head, and her mouth, tight and hot, dragged across his dick. Her lips left crimson lipstick rings around his cock, as if to mark her progress, and his abs clenched as he saw it. He liked having her mark on him.

"Are you wet for me, Baby?" he crooned, the heat of her mouth sending tingles down his spine. He noticed her hand drifting under her dress, and it only fueled the fire within him.

"Spread your legs and touch yourself," he ordered hoarsely, watching as she complied, one hand sliding between her thighs. Rhiannon looked good with submission, and he'd decorate her in jewels if it meant she'd be his good little wife and act obediently like this outside of the bedroom. A dark laugh spilled from his lips. If only it were that easy—nevertheless, he'd praise what he could in the hopes that it would stick.

"Good girl," he growled, eyes darkening with desire as his body tensed. "Now fucking swallow."

Muffled moans filled the air around him as he buried himself in her warm, inviting throat. Each swallow sent shockwaves through him, and Adrian groaned lowly in his chest, feeling too far gone.

He had her right where he wanted her—hungry, willing. The world faded, and all that remained was this moment of primal connection.

"Now, Rhiannon," he urged, gripping her hair while thrusting deeper, "take it all."

Right to the very root, Adrian grunted, urgency filling his blood as his cock throbbed harder in her mouth. Warm, it was so fucking warm. Tingles flickered down his spine as he gave into his impulses and fucked her mouth raw, his desire taking over. He

couldn't stop. He couldn't fucking stop.

His cock burst as she let out a desperate moan, her little body shuddering at his feet. "That's it, Gorgeous," he gasped, shoving to the root one last time as he spilled cum down her throat. "Swallow it all."

He felt her nails scrape the back of his thighs as she gasped for air. The fire between them crackled, and as she sputtered, he let go, pulling her up before their eyes locked.

"Now, it's my turn," he growled as he dropped to the floor in front of her. Adrian grabbed her by the waist and pulled her to him, his sensitive cockhead sliding between their bodies and leaving him bristling even as he kissed her, tasting himself in between her teeth and her tongue. Beaded nipples brushed his chest, and he dropped his hands to her ass, squeezing the muscle there as he spread her legs wider and found her wetness trailing down her thigh.

Satisfaction bloomed as he trailed his fingers through it, and when he dragged them to her pussy lips, he thrust two fingers in without hesitation. Rhiannon yelped in surprise, her sharp teeth biting his bottom lip as he kept up the pace, his other hand slipping to her clit, and when he pinched it, she screamed, shattering in his arms. He wasn't surprised, he knew she'd been unable to do anything about her desire since he caught her with her hands in her pants. He'd been doing that on purpose, and now that she'd come, he only wanted more.

Adrian wasn't done with her yet.

Nudging her onto her back, he pressed himself between her spread legs and shoved his face toward her dripping pussy. "Let me worship you," he demanded, his desire burning in his chest as he kissed her, tasting himself on her tongue.

He used his teeth to scrape red marks on her thighs, then licked up whatever dripping

fluid he could find, and while she was still shuddering with his fingers in her pussy, he sucked his clit into her mouth until she let out another scream. Feeling her tightening on his fingers, Adrian added another finger and his blood burned when Rhiannon's back arched. She sounded like she was choking, and he stopped for a moment, only to find her staring up at the ceiling with the kind of shock he'd only ever reserved for virgins. He doubted Rhiannon was one, she wouldn't have allowed her father to control her to that point, but he was going to make sure she forgot his name. Whoever the fuck it was that had been with her first. Dark, possessive need only firmed his resolve.

"You can take it," he purred, marking her legs with his teeth and tongue, and leaving dark hickeys that he wanted to tattoo on her skin. "Relax for me, Baby."

Her body shuddered, and her legs widened further until her ankles met her ass cheeks and her knees hit the bed. "Look how flexible you are," he crooned, leaning his weight on her thighs as he pressed and curled his fingers even deeper in her sopping wet cunt. She was tight, especially now that she'd cum for him, but he didn't mind taking his time. "Can you take more for me?"

She'd have to, his cock was growing harder and her tight pussy needed to learn to take a little more before he fucked her raw.

Rhiannon whimpered, her fingers gripping his hair tightly. "No."

"You sure?" he said, his voice admonishing, a complete contradiction to how his eyes gleamed with male satisfaction. She shook her head, her thighs starting to tremble from the stretch, and before she could say anything, he dropped his mouth to her pussy and nipped at her clit, pulling a squeal from her lips.

He wasn't expecting her to cum again, and so soon—but Rhiannon's whole body shuddered. She let go of his hair to press her hands against the floor for leverage as

she arched, her abs clenched tightly enough for him to see.

"God, the things I'm going to do to you," he said, laughing darkly as she recovered, her chest heaving.

"Damn it, Adrian!" she hissed as he bent to suck on her clit. "Adrian, wait—I can't, it's too soon."

Still sitting up, Rhiannon sank her fingers into his hair, tugging at his scalp as he left her sensitive clit to lick circles around her labia.

"Shit!" she squeaked, her pussy gushing around his fingers as he tried to add another finger. It took a moment to work his way through her tightness, he didn't want to tear her, but the moans she was making made it twice as hard as it should've been. "I can't," she whimpered, arching up.

"Just relax." Adrian stopped to grin, and as she relaxed and let out a breath, he added a fourth finger. His hand stilled while she moaned, low and deep in her throat. "See," he murmured, pressing his tongue to her clit again.

The pressure on his knuckles was enough to make him insane, and the bite of pain as Rhiannon pulled out his hair made him all too aware of how heavy his cock was between his legs.

"Feels so full," she murmured as she slumped to the floor, her mouth dropping open on another low moan as he started to fuck her pussy, nice and slow.

Then, right before she orgasmed, he pulled away and laughed at her scream of outrage. "I thought you couldn't take more," he teased.

"I hate you!" she spat as he returned his hand in one thrust that left her arching up

with a cry.

"Now, why would you say such hurtful things," he purred as she rocked against his hand. "That's it. You're doing so well, Princess," he coaxed, loving the way her thighs clenched against his grip. "Give me one more," he coaxed, brushing the tip of his thumb against her heat. She clenched around him, but he pulled it away. She wasn't ready for a full fisting yet, but maybe with enough training, he'd get to feel the full heat of her around the entire breadth of his hand. Dropping low to taste her mouth, Adrian's breath hissed from deep in his chest as Rhiannon latched onto his bottom lip with her sharp teeth.

As if to make up for the pain, she sucked it into the heat of her mouth, falling into another orgasm. Her mouth spilling the sound of her whimpers into his.

As soon as her pussy stopped clenching around his fingers, he pulled his hand away once more.

She cried out hoarsely while her pussy gushed, and liquid seeped to the floor beneath her. His cock was brushing against the floor in a way that made hiss between his teeth.

Her body submitted to him beautifully. Rhiannon submitted beautifully .

"I've never seen anything more stunning," he murmured, He palmed his cock and brought it to her entrance, and this time, while she was staring dazed at the ceiling, he guided himself into her clenching tunnel with a raspy moan.

She'd felt good on his hand, but it was nothing compared to how her pussy wrapped around the length of his cock.

"Adrian," she breathed, arching up until her nipples brushed against his chest. "God!

You're so deep." Her voice cracked as his hips finally met hers, and his whole body shivered. There was nothing he wanted more than to fuck her hard and fast on the floor, but he didn't want that for their first time together.

"Let me worship you," he murmured again instead and as she wrapped her legs around his waist, Adrian palmed her hip and started to make love to her. He couldn't tell her it yet, but he thought he might be falling for Rhiannon, and when she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him in for a kiss, those feelings only grew.

Adrian set a smooth rhythm that had his cock sliding through her pussy, and when he pushed a hand under her ass to lift her hips, his cock reached something deep inside her that left Rhiannon grunting.

Sweat flickered across her brow, and it wasn't long before his balls grew tighter, and he felt the familiar spread of tingles running down his spine—but it wasn't until she pressed her lips to his ear and murmured, "I want to feel you cum in me," that made him lose all sense of the control he'd gained. Adrian's thrusts grew quicker, and his breaths became shorter as he drove into her, and when he finally came, it was with a deep moan he felt to the bottom of his fucking chest.

Delicate fingers traced circles on his stomach. They were still lying in the living room, too sated to go upstairs to his room. Neither of them was bothered about the potential of someone walking in, though Adrian knew his alarms would blare the second someone opened that door without his permission. Yet, he couldn't help but feel warm deep inside him at another sign of his wife's trust.

Looking at her, he tucked a hair behind her ear. She snuggled closer, but the barest of creases lined her forehead, telling him that her family's attitude still bothered her more than she would admit.

In an attempt to lighten the situation, he laid a hand along her spine and drawled, "I told you that you couldn't resist me, Princess."

"You said I'd come begging," she replied dryly, and he let out a huff of laughter. So he had.

"I distinctly remember your pleas, Baby," he crooned, dipping his mouth to take hers in a kiss that left him lightheaded. "Or was that all in my imagination, too?"

"Blame it on the suit," she responded with a catch in her voice, and before he could laugh at what she'd said, Rhiannon climbed above him and kissed him deeper, her naked body stretching languidly over his.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:04 pm

The laptop screen glowed, displaying spreadsheets and financial statements, but Rhiannon's focus was far from the numbers. Her mind kept replaying the events of the previous night—the searing intensity of Adrian's touch, the unexpected tenderness in his eyes, the sheer, unadulterated pleasure of their marathon sex session.

It had been intense, a level of intimacy and connection she'd never experienced before. His age and experience showed, of course, but she'd been more than ready for him. She was grateful, honestly. She'd never felt so completely claimed, so utterly seen before. The afterglow lingered, a pleasant warmth that had settled deep in her bones. And if he was sincere about giving her a more significant role in the business—a genuine partnership, not just a convenient alliance—this marriage might actually not be so bad after all.

A sharp knock on the door jolted her back to the present.

Adrian.

He looked...damn, he looked good. Even better than last night, all sharp angles and casual confidence in a simple black t-shirt and jeans, his usually messy blonde hair perfectly styled. The way he filled the bedroom doorway with that smirk on his lips, all casual masculinity and lethal charm, sent a fresh wave of heat through her. The unexpected surge of attraction, the way her pulse quickened at the sight of him... she fought to tamp it down, reminding herself why she was here, why she was doing this. But the feeling remained—a dangerous, thrilling undercurrent that she couldn't quite ignore.

Before she could process her reaction, he closed the gap between them, his lips

finding hers in a deep, hungry kiss that stole her breath. It was different this time—less urgent, more deliberate, more...possessive. He tasted of mint and something else, something uniquely him, and the kiss was long and slow, allowing her time to fully drink him in, to lose herself in the heat of the moment.

He finally pulled away, his gaze intense, a smoldering heat that lingered in his eyes.

"We need to talk," he murmured, his voice low and serious. The casualness was gone, replaced by a quiet intensity that sent a fresh wave of apprehension—and a flicker of something else, something more thrilling—through her.

He pulled up one of the armchairs around his massive bedroom, his posture suggesting this wasn't a quick conversation.

"I spoke with your father last night after the dinner," he began, his voice calm, almost too calm. That calmness was a red flag; she knew how much her father hated being interrupted, how he thrived on controlling the narrative. This calm was something else entirely.

"When was that?" she questioned, brow furrowing.

"Before your brothers decided to be assholes," he grunted, shifting to lean back on the chair.

He recounted their conversation, detailing how he'd casually asked about the investigation into her near-kidnapping, only to be met with a dismissive response from her father. Adrian leaned forward, the tension in his voice palpable as he described the moment. "I asked him—just out of concern for you, of course—how the investigation was progressing on the original attack, and his reaction was... unsettling."

Rhiannon's heart raced as she listened, a gnawing sense of dread clawing at her insides. She'd always known her father didn't care for her very much, but that... something wasn't adding up. Did he really not give a shit about her at all?

Adrian continued, his eyes watching her carefully as if he knew how she felt. Her fingers twisted the bedcovers. They'd grown so close, so quickly, it was almost unnerving. "He told me it was 'nothing to worry about,' almost brushing it off like an inconvenient fly buzzing around a light. He claimed it was just a minor incident, something that would resolve itself, and there wasn't much else to say about it."

Rhiannon winced, and his voice softened. "I'm not saying this to hurt you—"

"No, I know," she quickly defended, but he was already up and crossing the room toward her.

"I'm just saying this because it felt so... casual." He crouched by the bed, reaching to close her laptop and set it aside. She let him, her mind racing as her stomach sank.

The way her father had approached the subject made her skin crawl. "That's not how a parent should handle something like this," she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper.

Adrian nodded, his eyes filled with intensity. "Exactly. It's like he wasn't concerned at all, like your safety was secondary to whatever schemes he had brewing. It lit a fire of suspicion in me. The way he treated it as a minor inconvenience made me question everything about his intentions."

"You think he's hiding something," she said softly, and his Adam's apple bobbed before he nodded.

Her father had always been a master at deflection, a puppeteer pulling strings behind

the scenes. But this... this felt different. The nearly casual dismissal of her life, of her safety, twisted in a way that left Rhiannon feeling exposed and vulnerable.

"What does he have to gain by acting like it wasn't serious?" she asked, her voice darkening with suspicion.

Adrian leaned back on his haunches, his expression contemplative as he considered her question. "That's the million-dollar question. Maybe the whole thing was staged, Rhiannon. Perhaps he wanted you to be shaken, to use the drama to gain something he needed."

She shuddered at the implication, her mind racing with possibilities. The thought that her father might be playing a game with her life sent waves of anger coursing through her veins. "It's clear he doesn't see me as anything more than a pawn. He's probably weighing his options, thinking of the best move for himself rather than my well-being."

"Precisely," Adrian affirmed, his tone steady yet urgent. "And that's why we need to dig deeper, figure out what else he's hiding. We can't let him dictate the narrative, not anymore."

Rhiannon nodded, a spark of determination igniting within her. The chilling realization of her father's indifference lit a fire in her gut, urging her to reclaim her life and fight back against the manipulations of those who thought they could control her destiny. Together with Adrian, they could unravel the layers of deceit—she would not remain a pawn in her father's game any longer.

"It was too...nonchalant," she said softly, her thoughts already racing. "What do you think that means?"

Adrian leaned back, a thoughtful expression on his face. "I don't know for sure, but

my gut tells me something shady is going on. Your father got everything he wanted with this alliance —his position is seriously improved—and while he hasn't shared the details yet, what else could he be planning?"

The question hung in the air, heavy and unspoken. She knew what he meant; he was hinting at something far bigger than a mere business deal. Her father had always been a master manipulator, but this felt different—more dangerous. The cold fear that had threatened to engulf her the previous night returned, sharper this time, fueled by the chilling realization that her father might have orchestrated the attack. She'd been a pawn, used in a larger game.

"What if it's about more than just the alliance?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper, the weight of the possibilities pressing down on her. "What if he used me?" The thought was a bitter pill to swallow, a realization that had been slowly dawning on her for days but had only solidified in this moment.

Adrian didn't respond immediately. He reached across the table, his hand gently covering hers. The simple touch sent a jolt of electricity through her, a stark reminder of the simmering attraction that continued to plague her.

"I don't know for sure," he said softly, his voice laced with a concern that wasn't entirely convincing. "But I trust my instincts, and I'm going to find out. Hopefully, with your help."

She stared at him, studying his face, attempting to decipher the emotions in his eyes. Was this just another ploy, another manipulation? Or was this something...real? The thought of working with him, of uncovering the truth together, held a certain terrifying appeal. There was a raw, undeniable attraction simmering beneath the surface, a connection that defied the anger and resentment, a force that threatened to derail her carefully constructed plan for revenge.

Instead of answering, she leaned in, her lips meeting his in a tender kiss. It wasn't a response, not exactly. It was a promise—a promise of trust, of collaboration, of a partnership that would defy the chaos and uncertainty that had plagued them both. The moment was filled with a tension that was both intoxicating and terrifying. She was falling, falling hard, and she couldn't bring herself to care whether or not she should be afraid.

His hands found her waist, pulling her closer until she was pressed against him, the warmth of his body a comforting weight against the turmoil raging inside her. His kiss deepened, his tongue tracing the line of her jaw, then dipping lower to taste the sensitive skin of her neck. The raw, untamed desire in his touch was a stark contrast to his earlier calmness, a reflection of the potent emotions that simmered between them—anger, fear, lust, and something that felt dangerously like love.

He pulled away, his breath catching in his chest. "I'm going to find out what your father's really up to," he whispered, his voice rough with a raw intensity that sent another jolt of awareness through her. "And I want you to help me."

The proposal felt utterly audacious considering everything that had happened, but there was a raw honesty in his words, a vulnerability that she hadn't seen before. And it was oddly compelling. This wasn't just about a business alliance or a convenient marriage; this was becoming something much more. She trusted her instincts—and her instincts screamed that he wasn't lying.

"I'll help you," she whispered back, her voice barely a breath against his lips. "But if it turns out this is all some kind of twisted game..."

His eyes narrowed. "Then you'll have my full, unwavering support."

He leaned in, his lips brushing against her ear. "And trust me," he murmured, his breath warm against her skin, "I wouldn't do this for anyone else." The implication

was clear, undeniable, and sent yet another wave of both excitement and trepidation through her. She was falling, falling fast, and she still didn't know whether to be terrified or elated.

He kissed her again. This time, the kiss was slow and tender, laced with a quiet intimacy that spoke of a bond that was deeper than either of them had realized.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:04 pm

The air in Mikhail's office hung thick with the scent of expensive cigars and unspoken tension. Adrian sat at the head of the mahogany table, his brothers, Lev and Ivan, flanking him while his cousins, Fedya and Viktor, occupied the opposite side. Irena, their fiercely independent sister, perched on the edge of a chair, her expression unreadable. The recent events—Rhiannon's near-kidnapping, the hastily arranged marriage—had thrown their carefully laid plans over finding information on the Irish into disarray.

"So, what's the damage report?" Mikhail finally asked, his voice cutting through the quiet. He was all business, his normally jovial demeanor replaced with a grim determination.

Lev summarized the incident, recounting the events from the security footage. "The guy was a nobody with no connections to any known groups. But whoever put him up to it...that's the question."

"Do you think it's someone who might've been working with Aleksander?" Viktor suggested. His tone was casual, but the question weighed heavily in the air. The Irish had been making increasingly bold moves against the Bratva, but their attacks had been mostly low-key, never anything that threatened the core of the family business.

"Doesn't make sense if it's connected to that weapons deal Rhiannon screwed up," Ivan pointed out, his gaze sharp. "Two separate incidents, unless..."

Adrian leaned forward, his expression grim. "That's exactly what's bugging me. Lucien's nonchalant response to my questions about the investigation was way off. Too casual. Like he knew something was going on, and it wasn't a big deal."

Fedya, usually quick to offer a snarky remark, remained silent, his eyes narrowed in thought. Viktor, though, was far less reserved. "Maybe this whole thing was a distraction? A way for Lucian to take care of the loose end and simultaneously get rid of his daughter."

Irena nodded slowly. "It would explain why he pushed the marriage so hard. It's more than just an alliance, isn't it? It's him protecting his interests."

Mikhail steepled his fingers, considering. "We lay low for now. Keep our eyes open. But Rhiannon... she's a target."

"Ilya's her main guard from now on," Adrian stated, "but she needs at least two guys on her at all times. No exceptions." He pulled out his phone and flicked toward his cameras, watching as Rhiannon got ready for the day.

A murmur of agreement circulated around the table. They shifted to a more relaxed conversation. Lev nudged Adrian playfully, his tone teasing. "Marriage suits you, little brother. You look...softer."

"Where's Rhiannon now?" Mikhail asked, amusement on his face. "I'm surprised you let her roam all on her own."

"Why wouldn't I?" Adrian replied as he switched off his phone and left it in his back pocket. "I know what she's doing, when she's doing it." He shrugged, crossing his legs at the ankle.

Ivan smirked, adding, "Yeah, he's definitely getting softer around the edges. It's almost creepy how you seem to have anticipated your wife's moves, always one step ahead."

Fedya chuckled, his eyes twinkling with amusement. "He's taken stalking to a whole

new level. And look, it paid off, didn't it?"

"Fuck off, it's not stalking anymore," Adrian grunted, shooting them all a glare as they burst into laughter. And it wasn't. Regardless of how often he watched his cameras to see what his wife was up to, there was more between them now.

The meeting dispersed, leaving Adrian with a restless energy, a mix of concern and anticipation. He'd left Rhiannon at the apartment, promising her a serious conversation, and after the previous night, his body ached to feel hers wrapped around him again.

Adrian found her in his office, perched on the edge of his desk, her gaze fixed on a sheaf of papers. She was dressed as if she was preparing for a business meeting—a sharp, tailored pantsuit, her makeup flawless, her hair pulled back in a severe style. It was a striking contrast to her usual casual attire. It was also a very clear message that she was ready to discuss business.

As he approached, his own mind already racing, formulating strategies, plans, and ways to manipulate the situation, his gaze was caught by the way her dress clung to her curves, the way her legs were crossed, the way she was holding herself. He knew what she wanted, what she expected. He leaned in, his hand resting on the back of her chair, his fingers tracing the curve of her spine. He paused, savoring the moment, the undeniable tension that crackled between them.

"So," he murmured, his voice low, "business meeting?" He lightly touched the nape of her neck, his touch sending a shiver through her. She didn't flinch, and desire flooded him at the small sign of trust.

"Yeah," she replied, her tone business-like, but her eyes flickered toward his hand,

giving him away. "I'd like to discuss my involvement in the family business."

He settled into a chair opposite her, his expression serious. He was ready. "If you want in, Rhiannon," he said, his voice direct and firm, his gaze locking onto hers, "you're in. But this isn't some casual thing. We're a team. I trust your ability, but I need you to trust me. You work with me, or you don't work at all."

Her gaze faltered for a fraction of a second before finding his again, her expression unreadable. She nodded.

He continued. "That also means no rogue operations, no going behind my back. Absolutely zero surprises. We need to operate on trust, on absolute transparency."

Her gaze remained locked on his, unwavering. The underlying tension between them was palpable. He'd felt it ever since he'd saved her, that raw, untamed energy. It was exciting and terrifying, a combustible blend of attraction and mutual respect.

"I understand," she finally said, her voice a little softer now. "And I agree to your terms. However..." She paused, a hint of defiance flickering in her eyes. "There are conditions."

He smiled inwardly. She was still playing games, but he liked it. She was smart, resourceful, just as capable as her brothers, just as fiercely independent. She was his equal. A worthy adversary and a potential equal, even a partner, in this new enterprise. It was going to be exciting. And it was also going to be hot as hell.

"Name them," he said, his tone laced with a hint of amusement. He leaned forward, his fingers trailing lightly along her arm.

"I need guarantees, Adrian," she began, her voice low, her gaze intense. "Guarantees that my safety won't be compromised."

He nodded, his eyes serious. "Non-negotiable. You will always have a security detail. Ilya will be your primary guard."

She leaned back, contemplating. "And what about you?" she asked, her gaze steady, her tone challenging. "What are you doing to assure my safety?"

"Whatever it takes. I'm always under protection, which means you'll be doubly protected in my presence. Triple, if you consider my own experience in the matter of security." He reached across the table, his fingers lightly brushing hers, sending an electric thrill coursing through her. The warmth of his touch ignited something deep within her, awakening desires that had simmered beneath the surface.

"Is that all?" he whispered, trailing a kiss against her cheek.

"That's all," she replied, her voice laden with desire.

"Good," he purred, leaning back slightly. "But when it comes to business with my wife... well, let's just say all deals are sealed differently. You think we can start by christening this desk?"

She arched an eyebrow, her expression unreadable, though her breath hitched at his suggestion. The corner of her mouth twitched slightly, betraying her intrigue.

Adrian smirked, a wicked gleam in his eyes. The atmosphere thickened with palpable tension, every lingering glance and unspoken word hanging suspended between them. The business negotiations had just taken a thrilling turn, but neither of them could shake the undercurrent of attraction that surged like a current, drawing them closer together.

He watched as Rhiannon's breath caught when his thumb gently stroked her knuckles. That seemingly innocent touch ignited a fire under her skin, and he could see the way

the intensity of his gaze pierced through her defenses. It made it difficult for him to focus on anything, but the memory of their lips molded together, the way they had moved in perfect harmony. The irresistible pull between them urged him to surrender to the feelings they had both tried to ignore.

As if he could read her mind, Adrian leaned in slightly, closing the distance. "You know I'm serious," he murmured, his voice low and husky. The warmth of his breath sent a tingling sensation coursing through her, igniting vivid memories of their last heated encounter, their bodies intertwined in a dangerous dance of passion and need.

The heat in the room intensified, a magnetic energy building as their gazes locked—each fully aware of the tension wrapping around them. He watched her flick her tongue across her lips unconsciously, her mind racing with expectations and fantasies that collided fiercely with the reality surrounding them. The desk—once merely a symbol of their business alliance—had transformed in Rhiannon's mind into a new territory where pleasure and ambition intertwined seamlessly.

"Christening has its advantages," she replied, her voice teasing but laced with an undercurrent of desire that she couldn't quite mask. "I suppose I can be persuaded."

"Oh, can you?" Adrian felt a surge of interest as his smirk widened. "Then why don't we begin with a little negotiation?" His fingers tightened around hers, a silent promise hanging in the air as he leaned even closer, their breaths mingling, filling the space with an intoxicating closeness.

In that moment, the world outside ceased to exist. All that mattered was the space between them; the powerful pull of their attraction felt both exhilarating and terrifying. He watched her swallow hard, sensing the duality of her emotions—fear of the unknown mingling with the intoxicating thrill of giving in.

"I'm sure I can find something persuasive enough," Adrian proposed, his breath warm

against her skin. The invitation hung between them, daring her to take the leap, and he could see her walls slowly starting to crumble.

With a decisive breath, Rhiannon leaned in, a spark of adventure igniting in her eyes. "You sure about that?"

Their lips met again, this time with a shared urgency that ignited all the pent-up desire between them. He pulled her closer, his hands encircling her waist, anchoring her to him as their kiss deepened, growing more fervent. The desk behind them faded into the background. Their world shrank to the intimate meeting point of their mouths, their bodies fitting together in a dance of unrestrained passion.

Every tentative caress, every sigh, only stoked the flames of longing that blazed within him. Adrian reveled in the feeling of Rhiannon's body against his, drawing her even closer as if he could keep the chaos of the outside world at bay. He felt the heat radiating off her, a mixture of desire and possessiveness, leaving him breathless.

Time became a blur, lost in the heated connection that crackled between them—a fusion of business, attraction, and undeniable chemistry that demanded surrender. As they finally pulled apart, breaths mingling in the charged air, he sensed they both understood that this partnership, which had begun out of necessity, had evolved into something much more significant—something far more exciting than either of them had anticipated.

With a slow smile gracing his lips, Adrian kept his gaze locked on hers as he knelt in front of her, fingers sliding up her legs to remove her clothes. "Be a good girl and help me strip you," he said, fingers tugging her pants off. "And I'll show you just how persuasive I can be. Lift your hips for me, Baby."

Grinning wide, Rhiannon lifted her ass for him to remove her panties, and as soon as they were gone, he tugged her from the desk and told her in a deep voice that sent

shivers running down her spine, "Bend."

Her mind blanked at the dominance in his voice, and when she blinked again, she found herself splayed across the desk with her ass in the air.

"You know," her husband crooned as his fingers entered her pussy. Just three, unlike last time, though she couldn't help but wonder if he'd try and fist her again. "I think I'm starting to enjoy negotiating with you."

She was damn sure he did, Rhiannon smirked, but the thought flickered away as Adrian pulled his fingers from her and teased the rim of her asshole. "Don't you fucking dare!" she squealed, throwing him a glare over her shoulder.

His laugh was low. "You never know, you might like it."

"Would you?" she snarled, her stomach clenching as he unbuckled his belt and stripped himself of his pants.

Adrian only smirked before pulling her into an awkward kiss over her shoulder, and before she could continue arguing with him, he thrust into her.

Rhiannon hissed. His cock was heavy, and even after they'd been together so many times, it still stung a bit as he sank deep.

"Relax for me, Baby," Adrian grunted, his fingers dropping to her clit. Her head swam as he rubbed circles around it and Rhiannon did exactly what he said, dropping her forehead to the cool table as her body melted for him.

"There's my good girl," Adrian purred and her breath caught as he started fucking her in that same lazy manner as before.

"Adrian," she breathed, her blood heating as he dipped a finger between them. His cock stilled and he pressed his finger in alongside it. Rhiannon's breath hitched and she widened her legs. It hardly should've been possible, he was so big, she didn't think there'd be any more space, but there was and he kept it there, as if to prove a point as he started to fuck her anew.

A moan left her, tingles sparking down her spine when he finally pulled his finger away and started to play with her clit again.

"Your pussy's so wet," he teased, and as she started to clench around his heavy cock, he pulled his hand away. "Does this mean I've won?"

Rhiannon was so frustrated, she made a low, growling sound she'd never made before. Her husband only laughed. "Tell me what you want, Baby."

Twisting to face him, she snapped out. "I want you to stop playing games and fuck me harder, Adrian Nikolai." A vicious smile flickered across her lips and she added in a saucy voice, "Unless you think you can't last that long?"

A sharp slap on her ass answered her, and the fire it lit in her made her squirm as Adrian muttered, "Clearly, you've forgotten the last time I fucked you. Maybe I should remind you."

"Do that," Rhiannon taunted, but her voice was breathy and high-pitched as Adrian picked up his pace. A cry burst from her as he smacked her ass again, something about the heat of his palm, and this position, left her blood burning in a way she'd never felt before. Squirming and gasping, Rhiannon slipped a hand down to rub her clit, but Adrian pulled her hand away and leaned over her.

On his next thrust, his cock dragged against something that made her swallow her protest and it wasn't much longer before Rhiannon came, her eyes rolling back into

her head.

It still didn't feel like enough. "Adrian," Rhiannon moaned, squirming as he fucked her harder. "Adrian, please."

"Tell me you're mine," Adrian told her, his voice deep and rumbling as he pressed in close.

"I'm yours," she promised him, her breath catching as he finally dropped a finger to her clit. Even after that first orgasm, it throbbed. Adrian rubbed circles around it until she came for him again. She expected him to pull away and continue fucking her hard and fast, but he didn't. He kept his thrusts slow and lazy, as if claiming her like that was no effort at all, as if it didn't cost him a thing to keep rubbing her clit while he fucked her.

Rhiannon moaned, cursing him outloud as she tried to escape, but Adrian didn't stop until the third, then the fourth, wave crashed over her. By the time he finally spent himself inside her, Rhiannon was slumped on the desk, and still moaning his name.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:04 pm

The crisp autumn air felt exhilarating against Rhiannon's skin as she stepped out of Adrian's apartment building, her two assigned guards flanking her like silent shadows. For the first time in weeks, she felt truly free, a sense of liberation washing over her that had nothing to do with the expensive clothes she wore or the luxury car waiting for her. It was the freedom from the suffocating expectations of her family, from the constant tension with Adrian, and even from her own self-doubt. It was a freedom that tasted like crisp air and sun-drenched pavements.

She needed to talk to Valentina, her closest friend since high school. They'd bonded over shared secrets, over family drama, over a mutual love of fast cars and even faster thrills. They'd promised each other years ago that nothing—not even the simmering rivalry between their families—would ever come between them. But things had been... complicated lately.

Valentina was waiting at their usual spot—a trendy café overlooking the city. The familiar warmth of their friendship was an immediate comfort, easing the tension that had been coiled tight within Rhiannon for weeks. She quickly updated Valentina, sharing her mixed feelings about Adrian—the raw, untamed passion, the unexpected tenderness, the frightening realization that she'd willingly walked into an uncertain future—and her growing fears about the near-kidnapping.

"So, you married into the Bratva," Valentina said, her voice laced with a mix of excitement and concern. "Wow. That's... intense."

"Tell me about it," Rhiannon replied, a wry smile playing on her lips. "It's all a bit of a whirlwind, honestly."

She recounted the events of the past few weeks, the near-kidnapping, Adrian's intervention, the hasty marriage announcement, her father's casual dismissal of the whole affair—almost unable to believe it herself as she told her friend about it. Then, in between coffee and croissants, she also shared her feelings—the confusion, the anger, the unexpected surge of attraction, and a budding sense of respect for him.

"But the thing is, Val," Rhiannon continued, "he actually seems... different from what I'd imagined. Not as callous as I thought. Maybe not even as manipulative. And when he defended me in front of my brothers... that did something to me."

Valentina raised an eyebrow. "You mean it? You actually think he's not playing a game?"

Rhiannon hesitated before admitting, "I... I don't know. I'm honestly not sure. He could be. But I did trust my instincts when I went for him. And there's something... else, too. Something real under all the intensity."

"Well, I knew about the marriage," Valentina said casually, then took a sip from her cappuccino before resuming, "You know how word spreads around here," she waved her hand nonchalantly. "But from everyone else's perspective, it's clear your dad was all but forcing the issue. I heard the men in my family talking about it all, but not directly with me, obviously." She paused. "I'll be honest with you, Rhi. The alliance was almost a foregone conclusion. The men had been talking about how this would massively boost their power, give them the edge. They all think it's a brilliant move, something that will boost business as well as help out with a few other alliances they might want to make."

"Other alliances?" Rhiannon frowned, "Like what."

"I don't know much," Valentina replied hesitantly, then she shook her head. "I mean, it's practically just speculation at this point, Rhi. But I heard your father's been

working on something on the sidelines that will make a lot more money in the long run. I have no doubt it's illegal, but with the hushed way everyone's talking about it... let's just say that an alliance with the Nikolai Bratva could be huge in getting him the connections he needs."

The revelation stunned Rhiannon. Her father had deliberately kept her in the dark, not bothering with the pretense of consulting her, of respecting her feelings and decision-making. It wasn't just that he'd arranged her marriage without her consent; he'd orchestrated the entire thing, treating her as nothing more than a tool.

She immediately messaged Adrian, sharing Valentina's information. A flurry of messages followed—a mix of shock, anger, and the building realization that both sides were playing a far bigger game than she'd ever suspected. The conversation shifted from Adrian's own feelings about her to the bigger picture, and Rhiannon voiced her growing anxiety and uncertainty. They decided to work together to uncover the truth, trusting their instincts and their growing connection.

After parting ways with Valentina and exchanging promises to keep each other updated, Rhiannon decided to confront her father, to question him about the leaked announcement—but the moment she'd stepped into her car and turned on the engine, the world began to spin.

A wave of nausea washed over her. She pulled over, gasping as her stomach lurched. After a while of heaving, when she couldn't control it anymore, she started feeling breathless and cold, needing to sit and rest before continuing. It was then Ilya pulled over next to her and, with a calm voice, asked whether she was okay and if she wanted to go home.

Rhiannon nodded silently, unable to speak, her body weak and trembling. The sudden illness, the overwhelming wave of nausea, left her feeling utterly defeated. As Ilya gently helped her into the back seat and took her home, Rhiannon could only let her

feelings wash over her. It wasn't just the betrayal and the anger; it was the realization that she'd been so easily manipulated, so carelessly disregarded. She'd been played, used as a tool, and the weight of that was almost unbearable.

Hours later, after resting and regaining a bit of her strength, Rhiannon was curled up on her couch when Adrian arrived, his face etched with concern. He'd heard about her sudden illness, the rushed trip home. He sat beside her, his arm wrapping around her shoulders, his touch gentle and comforting, dispelling some of the darkness that threatened to engulf her. He listened as she recounted her conversation with Valentina and her subsequent illness, sharing her own frustration and his own suspicion toward her father. They shared quiet moments, exchanging words of comfort and reassurance, their connection deepening amidst the chaos and uncertainty.

Hours drifted by, marked only by the deepening twilight that painted the room in hues of orange and purple. Adrian remained by Rhiannon's side, his presence a comforting anchor amidst the storm raging within her. He didn't try to fix things or offer easy solutions; he simply was there, a silent bulwark against the waves of uncertainty and fear threatening to consume her. He stroked her hair, his touch gentle yet firm, offering a silent reassurance that transcended words.

"It's all a bit much, isn't it?" Rhiannon finally whispered, her voice barely audible above the quiet rhythm of his touch. A shudder ran through her, a testament to the physical and emotional toll of the day.

Adrian tightened his embrace, his gaze fixed on the shadows dancing on the wall. "It is," he agreed, his voice a low rumble that resonated through her. "But we'll get through it together."

"Do you really think so?" she asked, her voice laced with doubt. The weight of the near-kidnapping, the hastily arranged marriage, and the betrayal by her father was

almost unbearable.

He paused, considering his words carefully. "I do. I've never felt... this way about anyone before," he admitted, the raw honesty of his confession startling her.

She looked up at him, her eyes wide, searching for some sign of deception. His gaze was unwavering, intense, and filled with a raw vulnerability that she hadn't seen in him before.

"I'm not going to lie; this whole thing has been a bit of a shock," Rhiannon admitted, her voice trembling slightly. "But you saved me, Adrian. I know that. And that means something."

He leaned down, his lips brushing against her forehead. "It does," he murmured, his voice thick with emotion. "And what happened last night... that means something too."

A blush crept onto her cheeks, the memory of their passionate entanglement sending a fresh wave of heat through her. She still couldn't entirely comprehend her feelings. They were complicated, volatile—a mixture of apprehension, gratitude, and a dangerous, exhilarating desire.

"My family," she said softly, her voice filled with a mixture of anger and hurt, "they don't see it, Adrian. They don't see that I'm capable, that I deserve more than being used as a pawn."

He shifted, pulling her closer, cradling her in his arms. "They're blind, Rhiannon. Blind to your strength, your intelligence, your worth. But I see it, and I'll make sure everyone else sees it too."

"You're in this with me, right?" she asked, her voice barely a whisper, her gaze

searching his. "This marriage isn't just some convenient alliance?"

He held her gaze, his eyes intense. "It's not. I want a partnership, Rhiannon, an equal alliance. I want you by my side, not as a pawn, but as a partner, an equal."

The raw honesty of his confession, the intensity in his eyes, dispelled some of her doubts. But the fear still lingered, a shadow that threatened to engulf them both.

"There are risks involved, Adrian," Rhiannon stated, her voice barely above a whisper. "Risks to both our families, to both our lives. What if this whole thing backfires?"

He kissed the top of her head. His touch was gentle, comforting. "We'll face them together. We always have, haven't we?"

She leaned into his embrace, letting the warmth of his body soothe her. "I don't know," she admitted, her voice a trembling whisper. "But I feel... safe with you, Adrian. More than I've ever felt before."

"And I'll make sure you always feel safe," he promised, his voice filled with a depth of feeling that sent another wave of heat through her. "Because you are safe with me."

The shared vulnerability in their confessions deepened their connection. They spoke about their fears, their hopes, and their dreams for the future—a future that was suddenly filled with both exhilarating possibilities and frightening uncertainties. It was in those quiet moments, in the unspoken communion between them, that their initial antagonism morphed into something deeper, something real and powerful. They were bound together not just by circumstance but by a powerful, undeniable connection.

As the shadows deepened, Adrian pulled her closer, his lips finding hers in a kiss that

was both tender and passionate, a testament to the growing bond between them. The kiss deepened, and all doubts, all uncertainties, were momentarily swept aside. It was then, as she drifted off to sleep in the comfort of his embrace, that Rhiannon knew, regardless of the challenges ahead, she'd have him. He'd protect her. He'd always be there for her. And for the first time in her life, she felt fully and completely secure.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:04 pm

Adrian felt the renewed energy surging within him each time he spent quality time with his wife, and it fueled his determination to take care of business. In an attempt to secure her safety, he'd decided to call her father, requesting a meeting to discuss their next steps and practically forcing the man to acknowledge his daughter, but as expected, Rhiannon's father was arrogant and presumptuous. In the end, he'd informed them he'd drop by soon—under the impression he was meeting only with Adrian and Mikhail. Well, he was in for a surprise.

He went to inform his wife only to find her hovering above the toilet seat, vomiting everything they had eaten that morning. He rushed to help her, soothing her when she blamed it on the food from that restaurant with Valentina, but Rhiannon only took one exasperated look at him and shouted, "Get out!"

Hearing the sounds of retching from the bathroom, he frowned. Concern coiled in his gut as he approached the door. "Rhiannon? Baby, you alright in there?"

Idling outside the bathroom doorway, Adrian adjusted the collar of his shirt in front of the mirror, taking stock of the man he had become in these past few months. Usually cool and collected, today, he felt an unfamiliar heat sparking beneath his skin as he prepared for the confrontation ahead. The image of Rhiannon emerged in his mind—fiery, strong-willed Rhiannon. He couldn't stand the idea of standing in a negotiating room with her father, but now that she was part of his life, the stakes felt personal. Their union was about to be tested.

"Just peachy!" she called back, her voice strained.

"Can I help?" he urged, half-expecting her usual biting retort. Instead, after a moment

that felt like an eternity, she opened the door, her complexion pale. Rhiannon rested her back against the frame, looking more vulnerable than he'd ever seen her.

"No?" she stated, but the way she said it lacked her usual fire, and his frown deepened. She sounded fucking exhausted. "Do I look okay?"

"Not exactly," he replied carefully, reaching for a glass of water. He'd been keeping things nearby in their room ever since he came home to find her curled up in bed and sicker than he'd ever seen her. "Here, drink this."

Rhiannon took the glass, eyeing him with a mix of gratitude and defiance, sipping as if it were a dose of poison. He nearly laughed, loving how irritable she got when she was sick. It wasn't something he'd ever thought of liking about a woman before, but these days, everything about her made him like her more.

"Are you sure you don't want to stay home?" he asked, reaching to tug her into his arms.

She stumbled slightly, cursing him out before her body melted just for him. Pure male satisfaction flickered in his chest. "I don't know what's wrong, but I'll survive. We have bigger things to tackle."

Adrian felt a rush of admiration mixed with something else he couldn't quite place. They were in this together, both unwilling to let the other down. "That's the spirit," he crooned, dipping to kiss her forehead. "As much as I liked you in my shirt, you should probably get dressed. I'm pretty sure your father's already on his way."

"Great. Just what I need," she muttered, annoyance sparking in her eyes as she stepped out of his hold and went back into the bathroom, calling over her shoulder, "Can't fucking wait to hear him undermine me again."

"I won't let him," he promised, snatching her hand and tugging her back before she got too far. He held it firmly, feeling her pulse quickening beneath his fingertips. "He's not my boss, and he certainly doesn't get to dictate who you are."

Her eyes flickered with unease before hardening into resolve. "Fine. Let's get this over with."

Half an hour later and they'd both settled in the dining room, each corner of the table as tense as a drawn bowstring. The clock ticked ominously as they awaited her father's arrival. He was late. Rhiannon fidgeted with her fingers, her apprehension palpable. Adrian squeezed her hand and leaned closer, whispering, "We are not his pawns. Remember that."

"Easy for you to say," she shot back, her voice barely contained. "He's always seen me as weak. Apparently, I'm just a bargaining chip now."

"Not anymore." Just then, the door swung open, and her father strutted through, a commanding presence that filled the room with an air of authority.

"Ah, there you are," he boomed, gaze sweeping across the table, pausing on Adrian with barely concealed challenge. "Looking sharp, Son. But style doesn't win battles."

A sneer curled on Adrian's lips as he met Lucien's glare boldly, his tone brimming with irritation. "And neither does arrogance."

"Let's get to the point, shall we?" said Rhiannon's father, briskly taking a seat. "I'm busy and lack time to waste on niceties."

"Good, neither do I," Adrian replied, unsettled by how right he felt saying it. He

steeped his fingers and leaned forward. "We need to discuss the leak regarding the alliance announcement."

Rhiannon's father raised an eyebrow, feigning innocence. "What are you talking about?"

Adrian kept his tone steady, piercing through the facade. "I believe you've noticed the rumors circling about the alliance. I don't know what business you're dealing with on the side, but it sure as fuck doesn't sound like what we agreed on. Rhiannon's life has already been put at risk once. It is unacceptable."

"Oh, please." Her father waved a dismissive hand. "I have no control over my staff. The Irish are simple-minded, information travels quickly. What do you expect me to do? Lock them all up?"

"Your lack of control isn't an acceptable excuse. This situation is compromising both of our families," Adrian pressed, feeling the heat in his chest grow more intense. "Not only does it look bad on both of us, but Rhiannon deserves better than this game. She's smarter and more capable than you choose to see."

"It looks bad on you. You're her husband, and if you can't control her or keep her safe, then it looks bad on you. And besides that, Rhiannon is in no position to make demands, Adrian," he replied, an edge creeping into his voice. "She's still learning the ropes; she doesn't know this world like we do."

"And who's fault is that?" Rhiannon scoffed, ire flashing in her eyes. "You haven't involved me in anything, Dad. I'm not a child, and yet you can't keep acting like I don't belong here. I've proven myself more than you realize. Hell, I nearly doubled the revenue for your clubs, and I can probably do the same if you let me in on everything else, too." Despite the confidence she was hoping to portray, Rhiannon couldn't stop that younger part of her that made her voice sound childlike with hurt at

being ignored by her father again.

"I wouldn't have had to arrange the marriage had you truly been capable," he shot back, venom in his voice.

"That's bullshit!" Rhiannon rose to argue, but she stumbled and placed her hands on the table instead, worrying Adrian. He stood with her, wishing he could rub circles on her back to soothe her, but unable to without looking weak in front of her dick of a father.

"I'm not going to get attitude from you, Rhiannon," Rhiannon's father stated, rising from the table with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Leave and let the men talk."

"She has every right to be part of this discussion," Adrian snarled at the disrespect, his body bristling with anger. "The Nikolais value her contributions. We need her insights on this matter, especially given the threat to her life."

Her father paused, eyeing Rhiannon with an expression that mixed irritation and surprise. "You think you can force my hand with a few pretty words? This isn't a game, Adrian."

"Nor is it for Rhiannon," Adrian shot back, his patience wearing thin. "You can't continue to treat her like an afterthought. She's not waiting in the shadows anymore. You've pushed her aside long enough."

Rhiannon glanced up at him, her lips parted before she turned to her father with a fierce expression, and his chest warmed. "I'm more than capable of handling this. My life is on the line," she asserted, glaring defiantly at her father. "You weren't supposed to tell anyone about the alliance, but a few people have come forward to say that you were speaking about it beforehand. I want to know why?"

"Your life is a pawn in my larger strategy," he countered icily. "I can't control what my staff overhears at dinner. If they learned of this alliance, who am I to stop them?"

"Perhaps if you weren't so intent on using her for your own ends, your staff wouldn't be gossiping," Adrian's voice was steady but simmering with frustration. "You care more about appearances than her safety. Is that really the legacy you want to leave?"

Her father's expression darkened, his thin veneer of composure cracking. "You don't understand the game, Boy. The kidnapping attempt was a lesson to show her that she's inexperienced. My men were quick to inform me it had gone wrong. She was never going to get hurt."

Anger darkened his vision, but it was Rhiannon that spoke. "You did this? You set me up to fail?" Her voice turned deadly in a way that made his blood heat, even as Adrian promised to rain hell on her father for putting her in that position. Memories of seeing her kicked by her father's men only worsened the tension in his shoulders; he should've made those men fucking scream for what they'd done.

"It was necessary! You needed to realize the risks involved, that this was no mere child's play," he rasped, anger evident in his gaze. "But look at the outcome. The Nikolais are drawn to you now. You've secured their alliance despite my actions—you're not useless after all."

Again Adrian's demeanor shifted sharply as he grew more pissed off, and leaning forward, he replied in a voice that was low but lethal, "From now on, you will play by our rules. Any more games, and you'll risk losing not just Rhiannon but your own resources. The moment the Nikolais drop your family, you're back to where you started. And I don't think you want that."

Rhiannon felt the tension in the air; it was thick enough to cut. She took a deep breath, rallying her thoughts. "I won't be a pawn in either of your games. This was

supposed to be about us, our future—not your power struggles. If we're going to move forward, you need to organize a proper party for the announcement, one that draws out whoever is staging these attacks."

Her father's eyes widened, but her words held the power of truth. They were no longer merely at his mercy. He was cornered, and the stakes were higher than ever. "Fine," he conceded, the tone begrudging. "But you will understand the risks involved."

"Understood, now get the fuck out of my house." Adrian glared at him. "My brother and I will be in contact with you to arrange everything."

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:04 pm

Rhiannon slammed the bedroom door shut behind her, the sound echoing in the heavy silence that followed. The tension in the house was suffocating, but it was her father's twisted game that cut the deepest. She leaned against the cool wall, trying to catch her breath as the righteousness of her anger surged. Just moments before, she had stood firm—not as a helpless pawn, but as a force to be reckoned with. At least, that's how she had presented herself... until he crushed her spirit with his mere presence.

Who does that? Who orchestrates their own daughter's kidnapping simply to teach her a lesson about the harsh realities of the mafia? The realization hit her like ice water. Her father saw her as worthless, just a tool for his plans, yet here she was, aching to prove she had value beyond his narrow definitions. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't shake the feeling that she was merely a pawn in a game she had never agreed to play.

Adrian followed her into the room, concern etched on his face, and she felt a flicker of vulnerability amidst the anger that coursed through her veins. "Talk to me," he demanded, his fierce gaze burning into her.

"Don't follow me," she snapped, quickening her steps as she paced circles around his room, but he wouldn't be deterred. Fucking Nikolais, she thought to herself.

"Rhiannon, stop. We need to talk about this!" he insisted, his voice steady and firm. "You can't just shut down."

She whirled around, her eyes flashing. "You don't get it, Adrian! I thought I could handle this, but my father confirmed everything I feared! I'm worthless in his eyes, just a tool for his schemes. He orchestrated that kidnapping to show me I'm not

capable!" Her voice cracked, revealing the vulnerability buried beneath her anger.

Her voice cracked, the weight of her father's disdain pressing down on her shoulders. Adrian stepped closer, his eyes softening as he absorbed her fury and pain. "You are not worthless," he declared, fierce conviction radiating from him. "You have more potential than anyone in that room cares to admit."

"He did this to teach me a lesson," Rhiannon said, voice shaking. "It's not just about the mafia, Adrian. It's personal. I've spent my life trying to prove I matter, and he just threw it all back in my face."

"No," Adrian argued, closing the distance until he was right in front of her. "He threw it back in his own face. He's the one who's blind to your worth." He forced her to meet his gaze. "If anything, he's the one who'll regret underestimating you."

"Regret?" Rhiannon scoffed, wiping a tear from her cheek. "My father doesn't regret anything. He sees me as expendable. He treats everything and everyone as chess pieces in his game, including me."

"Then let's change the game," Adrian suggested, his voice dropping to a low, conspiratorial tone. "We can show him what you're capable of. It starts here, right now."

She gazed at him, uncertainty flitting across her features. "What are you talking about?"

"Tonight, we meet with Mikhail and the others. You'll attend as my equal, not just as his daughter—" he took a deep breath and pulled her to him, dropping his forehead onto hers, "—but as a formidable force in both families' businesses. This is your chance to demonstrate who you really are."

Rhiannon blinked, evaluating the sincerity in his eyes. "You really think that will change anything? He'll write it off as a fluke. I can't just parade around like a trophy."

"No." He stepped forward, placing his hands gently on her shoulders. "You won't be a trophy. You will stand your ground. Show them both your strength and conviction. The position you want—" he lowered his voice, "—it's yours for the taking."

A flicker of hope sparked in Rhiannon's eyes, but she was quick to shield it with skepticism. "And what if it backfires? What if Dad makes it worse somehow?"

"Rhiannon," Adrian said firmly, leaning closer. "We're not playing by his rules anymore. We're playing by ours. I refuse to let you be treated like a pawn. You need to take charge of your narrative and prove them all wrong. Show them you're the bloodthirsty little queen you were meant to be."

Rhiannon studied him, the tension between them shifting slightly, uncertainty giving way to determination. After a heartbeat, she raised her chin defiantly. "Alright. I'll do it." Something within her stirred, fighting against the heavy chains of self-doubt. She took a deep breath, feeling her resolve strengthen.

Adrian's face lit up, and for a moment, it felt as if their connection deepened. "Just remember, you're not alone in this. I'm right beside you." His words wrapped around her heart like a protective shield. "You're stronger than you think, Baby. Stronger than any woman I know, and if we work together, then we'll leave them regretting ever trying to make you feel otherwise."

Together. The word hung between them, and a complicated mix of emotions cascaded through her. Was it just gratitude for having him at her side, or was it something more? A hint of love? Just as quickly as that thought came, she pushed it aside, focusing instead on the upcoming challenge.

Later that evening, Adrian's family gathered for dinner, a welcome distraction from the intensity of the day. Family gatherings grounded her, and she immersed herself in the banter and laughter, cleverly sidestepping any conversations about her father. Still, she couldn't shake a lingering heaviness deep within.

After dinner, as the women gathered for a chat, Rhiannon found herself laughing and sharing stories—moments that felt normal and just out of reach since her father's visit. When laughter turned into a cheer among the women, her heart lightened—but it didn't last. A sudden wave of nausea washed over her, and she excused herself to the bathroom once more.

Leaning against the sink, she looked at her pale reflection in the mirror. The dizziness intensified, and a sense of foreboding settled in her stomach.

"Just a bug," she muttered to herself, but as she splashed water on her face, a single question surfaced from the depths of her mind: when was the last time she had her period?

The realization crashed over her, icy and terrifying. Dammit. She fought to give the appearance of control, but already, a sinking feeling began to loom, as if she were plummeting into something deeper than fear, something she couldn't quite grasp.

She emerged from the bathroom, forcing herself to smile through the tremors of anxiety. With Adrian by her side and the warmth of family surrounding her, she had to hope that whatever was happening within her.

Walking back to the group, Rhiannon stopped near Adrian just as Mikhail turned to look at her. "My brother tells me you're looking to help out," he murmured, a casual arm thrown over his wife.

Rhiannon met his gaze, unflinching, her determination radiating from within. "I'm here to contribute, not just to observe," she said, her voice steady and resolute.

"I know it's not conventional, and most women won't work within the mafia, but I want something different." As she spoke, she felt the atmosphere shift around her. She could sense the surprise flickering across the faces of Adrian's brothers, and deep inside, a swell of pride began to build within her. This was a side of herself she had never fully revealed, but here, in this moment, she was ready to claim her space.

"Let's get to it, then," Viktor said, intrigued, his tone challenging. "What do you envision your role being within our operations?"

"I want to be involved in the Irish ventures," Rhiannon replied, her voice unwavering. "I may not have been raised in this world, but I know enough to discern opportunities, and I refuse to be sidelined anymore."

Fedya leaned forward, his expression dubious as he scrutinized her. "Is that so? And what makes you think you can handle it? This isn't just a game, Rhiannon."

Rhiannon could feel Adrian's frustration boiling just beneath the surface as he defended her. "She knows more than you think. Rhiannon's insights could provide opportunities we haven't considered."

"Insight alone isn't enough," Rhiannon interjected, her voice sharper than before. "I can bring fresh ideas to the table. It's time for the old ways to adapt to new realities, especially considering the dynamics between our families."

A tense silence blanketed the room, and Rhiannon held her breath as her words hung in the air. The intensity of their stares weighed heavily upon her; they were testing her, measuring her worth against the traditions they had upheld for generations.

Then Mikhail leaned forward, his expression contemplative. "We've seen your tenacity. We watched how you dealt with the earlier incidents surrounding the weapons deal. It hasn't gone unnoticed."

Rhiannon met Adrian's eyes, the spark of confidence she had fought so hard to hold flickering momentarily under the weight of their appraisal. But Adrian intervened, his voice steady and firm. "Rhiannon deserves a chance to prove her worth—not just to you but to her family as well. The Irish mafia has its own pitfalls, and having someone with her perspective can only strengthen our standing."

"Agreed," Mikhail said, raising an eyebrow. "But understand this—if you're to receive the responsibilities you're asking for, it will come with scrutiny. Your father won't be able to shield you from that."

The tension intensified again as her father shifted uncomfortably, and Rhiannon crossed her arms defiantly. "He wouldn't want to anyway. It's clear he wants me to fail," she said bitterly. "I want to prove I can stand on my own two feet."

"Very well," Mikhail replied, his tone neutral but still challenging. "You'll have a chance, but it will be earned through results. Show us what you can do."

With renewed determination flooding her features, Rhiannon nodded. "I promise I won't disappoint."

In that moment, Rhiannon felt a surge of empowerment; they were no longer hiding in the shadows of her father's influence. She was taking the lead.

For the next hour, they discussed ventures and strategies, Rhiannon contributing ideas that even surprised Adrian. She stood her ground and showcased her insights, compelling and fierce, while Mikhail observed her closely; she could feel the respect starting to form in the room.

As the meeting came to a close with decisions made regarding the Irish partnership, Rhiannon realized it wasn't just about holding her own; she'd made a real impact.

When the brothers began to rise, Adrian turned toward her, catching her eye as she leaned back in her chair, a victorious smile breaking free despite the seriousness they had just faced. "You were amazing," he said, pride swelling in his voice.

"Thanks," she breathed, allowing a shy, genuine smile to spread across her face.

As Adrian prepared to leave, she felt the exhaustion starting to set in, her heart racing with a mix of exhilaration and the remnants of anger. He closed the distance between them, taking her hands in his, locking eyes with her in a way that made her heart flutter.

"You were incredible," he said, his tone colored with genuine admiration. "You stood your ground like I knew you could."

The glow of victory began to bloom on her face, but she couldn't shake the weight of her father's harsh words. "That felt like a battlefield," she admitted, her voice trembling. "But did I really get through to them, or am I just going to piss him off further?"

"Rhiannon, you surprised everyone in that room, including me. You took control of your narrative. That's what matters," Adrian reassured her, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear, the warmth of his touch grounding her in the moment. "And your father? He'll adapt to this new version of you. It might take time, but your strength has planted a seed of doubt in his mind about underestimating you."

Rhiannon exhaled deeply, the pent-up tension from the meeting slowly fizzing away. "You really think so?" she asked, a hint of uncertainty creeping into her voice.

"Yes. He may not show it, but you caught Mikhail off guard. And now, it's up to us to consolidate that progress," he replied, squeezing her hands gently as he watched the spark in her eyes reignite. "Let's focus on the next steps for our families. Together."

They stood in the charged silence for a moment longer, the weight of their shared experience hanging in the air. Possibilities felt tangible, like a door creaking open to a brighter future. Rhiannon finally broke into a smile, her weariness peeling away as she looked up at him, excitement simmering just beneath the surface.

"You're right. This is just the beginning," she declared, her voice brimming with newfound determination.

"Absolutely," Adrian agreed, the enthusiasm in his gaze mirroring her own. "We'll strategize, find our footing, and ensure the alliance strengthens and evolves. I'll stand with you every step of the way."

As he stepped back, gauging her response, he leaned in to plant a gentle kiss on her forehead. The gesture lingered, and Rhiannon couldn't help but remember her thoughts in the bathroom. Would he still feel the same if what she suspected was true?

Ice-cold dread dripped down her spine. If it was true, she knew Adrian would be pleased, but would he still allow her to go along with everything they'd spoken about?

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:04 pm

"Hey, Baby," Adrian murmured, dragging his palm over Rhiannon's body. It'd been a fucking long day, and all he'd wanted since coming home was to find her and kiss her, maybe more if she felt like it.

While he'd been dealing with her prick of a father, Rhiannon had taken a few days off until the bug disappeared. Adrian hadn't even realized how much he'd missed her until he walked into the apartment.

Seeing her standing in the living room felt like a balm to his tired mind, and he gravitated to her without a second thought.

"Hi." Rhiannon smiled tightly, and Adrian frowned as she dodged his kiss. "Sorry, it's been a long day." Her eyes turned to the floor, and unease knotted his stomach as she pulled away. "I really just want to shower and go to bed."

"I heard you were with Irena," he said, feeling forced to take a step back. "You feeling better, Baby?"

Ever since the dinner with his family a few nights ago, she had been keeping her distance, attributing her absence to a stomach bug. But he knew it was more than that. He could practically feel the weight of her unease lingering in the air between them.

Rhiannon shook her head, then muttered something unintelligible before she kissed him on the cheek and darted to the bathroom.

He clenched his fists in frustration. The way her father had treated her—cold and dismissive—had cut deeper than even he had realized. Adrian's heart tightened at the

thought of her father manipulating her emotions, making her question her worth and place within the family. It made him furious. If he could, he would confront her father, demand an explanation, and make it clear that Rhiannon was not a pawn in his games.

But more than anger, Adrian felt a deep-seated worry. Despite his assurances about her place in their business, he could sense Rhiannon was still struggling to shake free from the suffocating expectations that loomed over her. In the wake of their meeting with Mikhail, he feared she felt no control over her destiny, that all his support hadn't been enough to restore her confidence.

Determined to change the course of the day, he began to formulate a plan. It had to be something that would make her smile, something that would reignite the spark they both knew was still there. An idea began to take shape in his mind: a fun date that would bolster her confidence and remind her of her strength.

The next day, Adrian cleared his schedule, and while Rhiannon was waking up, he presented the idea to her, his voice low in the quiet of the room.

"I have a surprise for you."

Rhiannon raised an eyebrow, her lips curving into a tentative smile that warmed his heart. "Oh? What is it?"

"Thought we could go to the shooting range today," he declared, unable to contain his enthusiasm. "A little friendly competition. I'll teach you some of my tricks." His eyes heated as she curled up against him. "And more depending on what you're in the mood for?" His thoughts turned to a game of dare where he might even be able to convince her to kiss him a little more heavily than just the pecks she'd been giving

him.

Her eyes widened, a flicker of joy dancing within them. "Really?"

"Of course, it'll be fun."

To his relief, Rhiannon's laughter rang out, brightening the heavy atmosphere. "Alright, I'm in," she said, a hint of mischief returning to her voice.

When they arrived at the shooting range, the anticipation pulsed around them. Adrian could sense Rhiannon's tension easing as they stepped into the brightly lit space, filled with the sound of gunfire and the acrid scent of gunpowder. He focused on her, taking note of the way her posture shifted—more relaxed now, her confidence starting to shine through.

"First things first," he instructed, guiding her to the firing line. "Let me show you how to hold the gun properly." He positioned her hands, their fingers brushing against each other, and Rhiannon shot him a sideways glance, her lips quirking.

"I know how to use a gun, Baby," she teased, standing on her tiptoes to nibble on his bottom lip. His breath caught, and his eyes darkened.

"I thought you might," he murmured against her mouth. "But I wanted to make sure before we turn this into a competition."

"What's the prize?" she asked him, her head tilted up to look at him. It reminded him of their first time together, and Adrian swallowed a moan, his cock thickening in his pants.

"Winner chooses," he replied hoarsely, settling a palm on her waist.

She let out a laugh. "That sounds alright. Best two out of three, then?"

He nodded, captivated by the sparkle in her eyes.

As the afternoon unfolded, they fell into a rhythm of playful competition, each shot met with laughter and playful banter. Adrian watched as Rhiannon's focus sharpened with every shot she took, her determination radiating off her in waves. She was a natural; her enthusiasm was infectious, transforming the day into something he wouldn't forget.

They spent hours laughing and challenging each other; each missed shot was met with gentle teasing, and each hit was celebrated with cheers. Adrian found that the more they engaged in this simple activity, the more her spirit seemed to lift. It was as if the weight of the world had temporarily eased from her shoulders, replaced by a blissful camaraderie that he had longed for.

When they finally wrapped up their time at the range, Rhiannon's smile was genuine and infectious. Adrian's heart swelled with hope—maybe, just maybe, this little outing had rekindled the confidence she so desperately needed.

However, as they returned home, the atmosphere shifted once again. Rhiannon remained cautious, her eyes clouded with uncertainty. The moment they stepped through the door, he instinctively reached for her, an urge to close the distance between them and reaffirm their connection. But she stepped back, something unspoken flickering in her gaze.

"We had fun today," she said, but the light in her eyes dimmed. He could sense the invisible barrier rising between them, the tension coiling tightly once more.

"Yeah, we did," Adrian replied, his brow furrowing with concern. "I'm glad we could do something together."

Rhiannon nodded, but she didn't move closer and he suggested a dinner, unwilling to let her return to the room before the heat between them faded.

The evening wore on, and although they shared laughter and stories, it felt as if there was an unbridgeable gap between them. When the time came to go to bed, she hesitated at the door to their shared room, her body language closed off.

"Rhiannon," he began tentatively, stepping forward to close the distance between them. "Is everything okay? I thought today would help you feel better. You've been acting strange, Baby. You know you can talk to me if you need to."

"I know, Adrian—I just..." She lowered her gaze, a shadow passing over her features. "I enjoyed the shooting range, really. But I... I still feel off. Just... tired, I guess."

Adrian's heart sank. No amount of good moments seemed to be enough to banish the unease that clung to her. "You know you can talk to me, right? Whatever's bothering you, I'm here."

Rhiannon offered him a faint smile, but it didn't reach her eyes. "I know. It's just... complicated." She shifted her weight, glancing back toward the hallway as if considering an escape route.

That gnawing doubt resurfaced in Adrian's mind, creeping in like a thief in the night. He could feel the worry eating away at him; the distance that had crept in after the dinner with his family had only amplified. He yearned to pull her close, to show her the love and support she so desperately needed, but her retreat felt like a brick wall rising between them.

As they finally made their way into the bedroom, the air felt thick with unspoken words. Rhiannon sat on the edge of the bed, her posture stiff. He wanted to bridge that gap, but every instinct told him to tread carefully.

"Do you want to watch a movie or something?" he suggested, longing for a way to lighten the mood.

Her eyes flickered up to meet his, and for a fleeting moment, he saw a glimmer of the Rhiannon he loved—the one who thrived on adventure and laughter. "Maybe later," she replied, though he could sense the hesitation in her voice. "I think I just need some time to myself."

The rejection stung deeper than he cared to admit, and he fought to maintain his composure. "Okay," he said softly, hoping to exude understanding, even as anxiety roiled within him. "I'll be right here if you change your mind."

He turned away, the weight of her distance heavy on his heart. He couldn't shake the feeling that the night might end without any renewed connection between them, without that intimacy that had always been a natural part of their relationship. As he lay in bed next to her, his mind swirled with thoughts and fears. Would this doubt continue to gnaw at him? Would it become a chasm too wide to cross?

Adrian tried to focus on the comforting rhythm of Rhiannon's breathing beside him, hoping to drown out the concerns that plagued his mind. But every minute stretched painfully long as he listened to her, feeling her restlessness rather than the peace he craved.

He turned onto his side to face her, softly tracing the lines of her profile with his gaze, admiring the way her hair fell over her shoulders, the way her lips curved slightly even in sleep. Rhiannon was a force of nature, and yet, while he adored that strength, he also understood the delicate balance of vulnerability beneath it.

"Rhiannon," he whispered, his voice low, "I know you're dealing with a lot right now, but I want you to remember that I'm right here for you. You're not alone in this."

She stirred slightly but didn't respond. His heart ached at the thought of her battling her demons, feeling lost in a world that seemed so relentless.

The silence stretched, and Adrian slowly closed his eyes, allowing rest to claim him. But even in slumber, uncertainty shadowed his dreams. He couldn't shake the feeling that he needed to do something—anything—to help her feel secure and loved in a world that was constantly trying to undermine her worth.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:04 pm

Rhiannon spent the morning pacing around her apartment, the weight of her thoughts pressing heavily on her. After much deliberation, she took a deep breath, determined to put a plan in motion.

"A shopping spree," she murmured to herself, her mind racing. "That'll do."

Valentina was always up for shopping, and Rhiannon seized the opportunity to involve her best friend under the pretense of needing a dress for the upcoming party. The truth was, she was tangled in a web of fear and uncertainty surrounding the possibility of being pregnant. The idea alone set her heart racing, and while she knew she needed to confirm her suspicions, the thought of either outcome—yes or no—terrified her.

As they strolled through the mall, with Valentina animatedly chatting about the latest fashion trends and laughing at Rhiannon's half-hearted attempts to engage, she felt a cloud of anxiety loom over her. The blissful distraction of shopping couldn't erase the gnawing questions spiraling in her mind. Would she really be bringing a child into this world, especially in a family like hers?

Once Valentina was thoroughly distracted by a rack of dresses, Rhiannon slipped away to the pharmacy section, her heart pounding. She quickly grabbed a few pregnancy tests, tucking them safely beneath a stack of beauty products. When she rejoined Valentina, the shopping bags filled with dresses seamlessly overshadowed the heavy weight of her secret. Valentina had even discreetly purchased a test for her, slipping it into one of the bags, their silent agreement strengthening their bond as friends.

Back home, however, the jubilation of shopping faded away as she stood frozen in her bathroom, the tests lined up before her. With shaking hands, she reminded herself to breathe. After a few agonizing minutes, one by one, the results rolled in—each confirming her suspicions.

She was pregnant.

"Oh, God..." she whispered, the word barely escaping her lips as a rush of emotions flooded her.

Her mind spiraled into an abyss of doubts and fears. Falling in love with Adrian had felt so right, yet now it felt impossibly complicated. Did he even love her back? Visions of her father's controlling nature flashed through her mind—of the suffocating upbringing she had endured—and she recoiled at the thought of potentially replicating that cycle. No child of hers would ever suffer through emotional neglect or manipulation. If there was any chance she might turn out like him, she wouldn't allow it.

"What if I need to find a way to escape?" she thought aloud, the sharpness of her anxiety gripping her harder. "This child deserves a chance no one ever gave me."

Rhiannon couldn't shake the feeling that her life was suddenly teetering on the edge of an uncertain future—one she was desperate to shape differently than her own.

As the hours passed, she prepared for the party, struggling to mask the turmoil brewing within her. Dressed in a beautiful gown, she had chosen with Valentina earlier, her reflection in the mirror should have sparked joy, but instead, it felt like a hollow facade. The ugly feelings coiling in her stomach weren't just from the pregnancy test but from the weight of her new realization hanging overhead like a storm cloud.

When Adrian arrived to pick her up, he immediately sensed that something was off. She pretended to be excited, plastering on a smile that felt like a betrayal of what was happening inside her. "You look stunning," he told her, his gaze warm and affectionate, but behind his admiration, she could see the concern lurking in his eyes.

"Thanks," she replied, trying to maintain a lightness that eluded her. "Let's just make it through this party."

Once they arrived, the atmosphere buzzed with excitement and laughter—a stark contrast to the heaviness she felt inside. They greeted friends and family, and she forced herself to engage in small talk, all while her heart raced with uncertainty.

As the evening progressed, her father's voice boomed across the room, gaining everyone's attention. He stood at the front, about to give his speech, so charismatic that it cleverly masked the danger he posed. Rhiannon shifted uncomfortably, unsure how she would endure the rest of the evening when it felt like her entire world was shifting on its axis.

"Tonight is a celebration of family and unity," her father began, his words laced with a carefully curated charm. But as he continued, she felt the familiar sting of apprehension nag at her—she was tied to this man and the consequences of his actions, yet she fought every instinct pushing her to retreat.

Next to her, Adrian stood strong and supportive, but even his presence couldn't quiet the doubts racing through her mind. Rhiannon remained acutely aware of the truth she was hiding, feeling as though the ground beneath her feet was wearing thin.

Her father's speech droned on, the words melding together into a blur as she grappled with her swirling emotions. Each praise for family loyalty and business ventures struck her like a taunt, a cruel reminder of her own place in this fucked up mess she was in, and the question of who she wanted to be—who she could be for her

child—clashed violently with the reality of her family's legacy.

Beside her, Adrian's warm hand found hers, holding tight, grounding her amidst the chaos of her thoughts. She glanced sideways at him, trying to draw strength from his presence. His brow was furrowed in that adorable way, a sign of his concentration on the speech yet worry lacing through the edges. Could he tell? The concern mirrored back to her in his warm gaze made her heart twist with uncertainty.

And then it hit her—a wave of nausea, more intense than she expected, crashing over her as her father continued to hold court. She closed her eyes for a moment, trying to will it away. The world around her dimmed as she fought against the rising tide of panic.

Not here. Not now, she pleaded, eyes pinched to stave it off.

Was she really prepared for motherhood?

"Focus on the now, Rhiannon," she whispered to herself. One foot in front of the other. The party continued, and she had to make it through this evening without unraveling.

Her words drew Adrian's attention, and he turned toward her. "Are you okay?" he asked, leaning in, his tone low and concerned.

"Yeah, just a little overwhelmed," she replied, trying to downplay her unease even as her stomach churned in response to the tension inside her. She needed to tell him, to let him know the truth about what was happening to her. But how could she when she was still figuring it out for herself?

They mingled through the crowd, exchanging pleasantries and catching up with various relatives. Rhiannon felt her stress levels rising, the air thick with unspoken

words and bottled-up feelings. Each laugh shared, each compliment directed toward her, seemed to highlight her anxiety rather than alleviate it.

Eventually, she excused herself from a conversation and slipped toward the back corner of the room, hoping the solitude would help her feel less overwhelmed. Once there, she leaned against the wall, trying to steady her breath. The fabric of her dress felt restricting, and she fought against the wave of emotion rising inside her.

Why did she feel so out of place in her own life? The potential of motherhood was terrifying, but it also opened a door she never thought she'd have to face.

"Rhiannon?" Adrian's voice broke through her thoughts, pulling her back from the edge of her spiraling mindset.

Startled, she turned to see him approaching, concern plain on his face as his eyes darted over her expression. "There you are. I've been looking for you. Are you sure you're okay?"

She nodded, forcing a smile that was only partially genuine. "Just needed a moment."

He stepped closer, his own discomfort evident. "You don't have to pretend with me. I can see something's wrong."

Rhiannon hesitated, her heart pounding as she gauged her options. She could tell him everything—how scared she was, how her father's oppressive presence hung over her like a storm cloud—but she couldn't. Not here, not now.

"It's nothing. Really, I'm fine," she said, the words hollow.

Adrian studied her intently, and for a brief moment, she thought he might push for more. But then he nodded, his expression reluctant. "Alright, but I'm here when you

need to talk. Just know you don't have to go through this alone."

"I know, Baby," she replied softly, feeling a swell of affection for him. He deserved to know—he really did. Yet, the fear of how he might react held her back.

As she joined him back in the crowd, the party continued to unfold around them, speckled with laughter and jokes. But all she could think about was the new reality awaiting her outside. Time stretched, her heart racing as she pushed against the uncertainty gripping her mind.

Rhiannon had thought the evening would be an escape, a chance to enjoy the company of family and friends. But it had become a crucible, testing her resolve and forcing her to confront the weight of her choices head-on.

As the party continued, her father called to the guests, beckoning them all to raise their glasses for a toast. "To family," he proclaimed, his voice booming across the room. "May we continue to strengthen the bonds that unite us!"

Self-righteous bastard.

Everyone around her raised their glasses, clinking them together in a chorus of cheer. Rhiannon's heart raced, a pang of panic tightening her chest. Family. The word echoed in her mind, resonating deeply with her own tangled feelings. She could hardly feel part of this collective celebration, knowing what was at stake.

Adrian nudged her gently, his brows furrowed with concern. "Come on, Princess. Tell me what's going on."

"Nothing," she lied, her voice strained. She forced a smile, but her stomach twisted at the thought of the life growing inside her. Would she be able to provide the loving environment for a child that she had longed for? Could she break the chains of her

past?

"Rhiannon," he whispered, leaning closer, "you're not fooling anyone. I can see it in your eyes."

"I'm just...exhausted," she lied, but she could tell he saw through it.

"Rhiannon, if something's bothering you, you can share it with me. You don't have to keep pretending everything is fine." His voice was low and gentle, but it still had an edge of impatience, clearly frustrated with the wall she'd built.

"I'm trying," she replied, her heart pounding as she realized how close she was to breaking. "I promise. Let's just get through tonight."

Adrian looked like he was going to argue, but her father called him before he could, and Rhiannon, feeling guilty, retreated to a quiet part of the room to watch them both. There, she leaned against the wall, her mind racing, unable to shake her circling thoughts. She wanted to tell him the truth—every fear, every hesitation—but every time she opened her mouth to speak, the words caught in her throat. What would he think? Would he see her as weak?

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:04 pm

Attending the party had been a fucking mistake, but it was the only way Adrian could get Lucien fucking Callaghan to agree to help out with finding the people after Rhiannon.

Still, an hour had already passed, and Adrian's frustration simmered beneath the surface, a storm threatening to break as he watched Rhiannon across the crowded room. She stood alone, lost in her thoughts, that familiar tension radiating from her.

She was fucking with him, and he'd thought they'd already realized that, but no. It was like all this time they'd spent together had been forgotten. The dates, dinner with his family, every time they'd slept together—made love to each other.

He knew he was spiraling, but he couldn't help it. Her beauty was undeniable; the gown she wore hugged her figure perfectly, and he could see the way the evening light caught in her hair, offering a soft halo around her. But it was the distance in her eyes every time they talked which unsettled him the most, and his heart twisted painfully at the thought.

The shooting range had been a breakthrough for her spirit, or so he had hoped. Yet here she was, back in her father's world, and it was as if she had locked herself away behind concrete walls once again. The men around her, fellow members of the mafia and family friends, were far too eager to admire her, their gazes lingering, making his blood boil. Couldn't they see she was his? Or that she was wearing his fucking ring on her finger?

"Ladies and gentlemen," her father began, his voice echoing across the room, commanding attention. "Tonight, we celebrate not only our partnership but also the

strength of family." Adrian clenched his teeth. The man beside him wouldn't know the meaning of family if it bitch-slapped him across the face.

"Adrian, Mikhail, join me," her father said, gesturing for them to come forward as he continued his speech, proudly telling everyone about the alliances being formed. Adrian felt a surge of resentment rush through him—he wasn't an accessory to his father-in-law's plans; he was a partner, and Rhiannon was his.

Lucien was still speaking, and he tuned him out. It sounded like a load of bullshit, and it very likely was. Lucien might've known how to talk, but he was hiding secrets in his promises. The perfect fucking politician.

The party was meant to celebrate this new alliance and their role within it, the official party her peacocking father wanted, yet it felt twisted. Adrian wanted this occasion to empower her, to let her know she was cherished and needed, but the atmosphere was suffocating, and his patience was wearing thin.

Unable to shake off the anger bubbling inside him, he glanced back in Rhiannon's direction. She was surrounded by people, his people, yet she looked so alone, hugging one arm around her waist like her stomach was still bothering her.

Damn it , he thought, his fists clenching at his sides. Enough was enough. If she wouldn't allow him to break down her walls, maybe the solution was to push them aside forcefully. The thought of taking her into the bathroom, away from prying eyes, to ease the pent-up energy between them was tantalizing. He could almost feel her warmth beneath him, the intimacy they so desperately needed, an escape from the prying eyes of her family.

God, it'd been at least a week since he'd had her, and all he really needed right now was a hard, dirty fucking to get everything back to how it'd been. He couldn't help but wonder if she felt the same way when she stared at him with those sad, lonely eyes.

Adrian exhaled sharply, the heat of annoyance rising. This wasn't what he envisioned. Her father always had masterful timing, knowing how to steal the spotlight and keep Rhiannon just out of reach.

But as he started to push through the crowd to locate her, something in his periphery caught his attention. The sight stopped him cold.

In slow motion, he saw it—an unmistakable gleam of metal in the hands of one of the caterers, a gun pointed directly at Rhiannon. At his fucking wife. The ground seemed to shift beneath him, adrenaline racing through his veins in an instant. Instinct took over, and his body reacted faster than his mind could catch up.

"Rhiannon!" The roar escaped his throat, raw and primal. The world faded as he leaped into action, propelled by fear and rage.

He hurled himself toward the caterer, tackling him from behind just as the gun fired. The deafening sound echoed through the space, followed by gasps and screams, the room erupting into chaos. Adrian's weight slammed down on the assailant, twisting to wrest the weapon free as he shouted, "Someone take him down!"

His focus shifted in a heartbeat to Rhiannon. Time slowed as he could see her on the floor, crumpling against the polished tiles, a dark crimson spreading across her gown, stark against the elegance of the evening.

"Rhiannon!" He tore away from the caterer, leaving him to the capable hands of others now rushing to subdue the threat, but his focus never wavered from her. Panic crashed over him as he reached her side, kneeling in the pool of scarlet that fanned out around her.

"Baby, stay with me!" Adrian begged, his voice broken as he looked into her eyes, which were wide with shock. Fear clenched around his heart, and he tried desperately

to maintain the presence of mind amidst the chaos surrounding them.

Her breath came out in shallow gasps, the pallor of her skin unmistakable. "Adrian..." Rhiannon's voice was barely a whisper, choked with pain and disbelief. Her eyes shimmered with tears, and in that moment, he could see beneath the fear—his beautiful, vibrant Rhiannon was still fighting, but she looked so fragile and fucking helpless.

"It's okay, you're okay. Help is coming," he promised, but as he looked around, the frantic movements of the party guests blurred into a cacophony of desperation. All he could focus on was her. "Just focus on me. Talk to me, Baby. Please."

"I... I can't..." She winced, her hand moving to her abdomen, fingers trembling as they found the site of her injury. A wail of distraught escaped her as she prodded the wound. "Baby," she sobbed, her expression paling as she repeated the word, her voice growing more and more faint in his ears. Her eyes were wide and urgent as they turned to him. "My... Baby..."

And fuck, it really did sound like she was trying to tell him something. "No, no, no." Adrian shook his head, panic flooding over him as his heart raced, each tick of time breathing new dread into the moment. He quickly scanned her body, trying to assess the damage. "You're going to be alright. I need you to stay strong, okay? You're the strongest person I know."

As if sensing the weight of his words, she nodded weakly, but her eyes conveyed her fear. The pounding in her chest echoed the scattered chaos of the party, and they soon became a world separate from everything else, collapsing around them with desperation.

"Just hold on for me. I'm right here." He squeezed her hand, feeling the warmth begin to fade from her fingers. "You're going to be okay. I'm here, and I won't leave you."

Another scream echoed through the room, punctuated by distant sirens approaching. The paramedics were on their way, but he knew that time felt relentless in moments like this. He longed to wrap her in his arms and whisk her away from the madness, but instead, he was confined to the scene, helpless and terrified.

He could hear her ragged breaths, each one more labored than the last. A sense of dread loomed over him as he replayed their last moments together—their shared laughter, the tender moments at the shooting range—and now all of that was threatened.

"Adrian, please..." Rhiannon's voice faltered again, drawing him back to her, the faint echo of fear cutting through his thoughts. "I—I think I'm losing... Baby...My, Baby."

In all his panic, he only thought she was talking to him. It never occurred once, as he gripped her, that she could be talking about something else.

Panic gripped him like a vice, clawing at his composure. "Rhiannon, focus on me. You're not losing anything. Look at me! Just look at me!"

He cupped her face, his thumbs brushing gently over her cheeks, trying to draw her into the moment with him. "Stay with me, Love. Just a little longer; help is coming. You can do this."

"No," she pounded a weak fist against his chest. "Baby! Adrian," she shouted with a cracking voice. "My baby...Oh god... my baby..."

The words echoed in his mind. Baby. Her baby. Not him. Her baby—their baby.

Adrian could hardly breathe. "Rhiannon, are you pregnant?"

Her nod was sluggish, and her eyes fluttered as she struggled to stay with him, and that resolve he had seen in her earlier began to diminish beneath the weight of her foggy pain. "I'm so sorry," she sobbed, the only words that came out clearly, making his heart lurch in his chest.

Panicking, he whispered fiercely, emotion flooding through every word. "You can't leave me. We have so much left to do together. You're going to be a fantastic mother; you're going to show our child everything amazing about this world. You can't give up now. I need you—I can't lose you."

With a final shuddering breath, her eyes drifted closed, and it felt as if the walls were closing in on him. Adrian's heart thundered in his chest, and he felt an overwhelming surge of desperation. He couldn't let her go—he wouldn't let anyone take her from him.

The sirens finally blared closer, the sound merging into the chaos of the night, and the paramedics rushed in. Adrian quickly pulled back, allowing the emergency team room to operate, but his hand never left hers, and he refused to let the fear envelop him.

"Stay with me, Rhiannon," he urged again, watching as the paramedics began assessing her injury, their movements swift and efficient. "Help is here, and you're going to be alright."

"Can you hear me?" one of the medics asked, checking Rhiannon's pulse. Adrian's heart raced, but he kept his gaze locked on Rhiannon's face, willing her to respond.

Gradually, the world swirled back into focus; adults moved like shadows around them, and he could feel the pulse and pressure of the room returning, but all he could hear was Rhiannon's steady breath, the sound laced with fragility.

"Don't close your eyes. You stay with me. I promise I'll do everything to keep you safe," he said, his voice firm despite the tremors of fear clawing at his throat.

And just as his world felt like it was crumbling, Rhiannon stopped breathing.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:04 pm

Rhiannon felt like she was floating in an icy haze, with a cold blanket wrapped around her, almost like a damp rug. She could barely catch the quick sensations—voices bouncing around her, urgent and sharp, breaking through the fog in her mind. One voice stood out amid the noise, calling her name in a way that felt both familiar and a bit strange, like a lifeline trying to pull her back to reality.

"Rhiannon! Wake up! Please!"

The shouting was frantic, matching the overwhelming hospital vibes—the strong smell of antiseptic, the hustle of doctors and nurses, and the distant buzzing of machines keeping track of heartbeats and breathing. Everything around her was flickering in and out, like she was losing consciousness bit by bit.

She caught snippets of conversations, each one adding to the confusing mess that surrounded her.

"I don't know how she's still holding on," someone said, sounding worried. She couldn't figure out who it was, but she felt the urgency in their tone. Another voice, more authoritative, chimed in. "The gunman admitted everything. He's revealed his employer..."

Her mind barely registered the words—their implications as they faded away into the fog. She could feel the weight of anger and pain in the air—Adrian's rage simmering just below the surface, a force she could sense, even though she couldn't wake up enough to acknowledge it.

Suddenly, she noticed other familiar voices. Val's laughter echoed in her mind, mixed

with the deeper tones of the Nikolai brothers and Adrian's family. Yet, each voice washed over her like waves pulling back from the shore, leaving her stuck in her uncertainty.

The darkness called to her again—heavy and all-consuming—but just when she thought it would pull her under completely, a voice broke through, resonating deep within her.

"Rhiannon..." It was Adrian, closer than she'd ever felt him. His voice wrapped around her like a lifeline, filled with emotion. "Please, you have to wake up. I need you. I can't lose you to this. Not like this."

With every word, warmth surged in her heart, and she dared to lean toward the flicker of light she thought she saw in the distance. She could feel him reaching out to her, grounding her against the dark. "I love you, Rhiannon, Baby, please. I've loved you for months. You need to wake up. I need you to survive."

Rhiannon's thoughts drifted sluggishly, and something prickled her memory. Was there something she'd forgotten? But that thought slipped away, and she got distracted as the light grew closer and closer. There it was—the light was right there now, glowing, golden, and warm. Adrian's words pulled her toward it like gravity, urging her to rise.

The whispers of reality pressed against her, and she imagined she could see him standing there in that soft glow, pouring his heart out for her. "You can't leave me. You have to wake up." His voice trembled with intensity, making her heart ache. "You're stronger than them, Rhiannon; you're so powerful. You've got to show them what you can do."

Adrian's determination hit her hard, lighting a fire in her chest that pushed her to fight through the fog. "You can't go before you prove yourself to them," he insisted, his

emotions filling the air around her. "You're meant to run the Irish side of the business, remember? Don't you dare let some motherfucker take you from me."

Each word was like a beam of light, brightening the darkness that threatened to swallow her whole. She was almost there—so close to breaking through the barrier holding her captive.

"Rhiannon," he pressed, his voice full of feeling, "please, Baby. You can't leave without knowing how much I love you."

Do you mean it? The thought bubbled up inside her, an echo of her desire to reach for him, to wrap her arms around the love that felt so near in this space between life and death.

And then the light surged, welcoming and bright, and suddenly, she saw his face before her—Adrian, his features sharp and clear but softened by concern and love. "You've got to wake up for me. Just open your eyes."

The light around him called to her as she leaned toward it, determination flooding her body. Rhiannon took a deep breath, feeling the warmth of his love surrounding her, and pushed against the darkness holding her back.

With a massive effort, she squeezed her eyes shut and made one last push against the shadows.

"Adrian!" she called, though she wasn't sure if it came out loud or just echoed in her mind.

As she opened her eyes, the warmth of the light exploded into brightness, and darkness faded away. She blinked against the brightness, and everything around her snapped into focus.

Rhiannon blinked against the bright lights, her vision slowly coming into focus. The harsh hospital lights lit up the white walls, and as she looked around, reality hit her like a tidal wave. She felt the cool sheets beneath her, the faint smell of antiseptic in the air, and then—there was Adrian.

He was right there, just inches away, his face filled with pure relief and emotion. The tension on his face eased a bit when he saw her awake, and in that moment, everything that had happened felt both far away and painfully close.

"Rhiannon! Baby," he breathed, his voice shaky with feeling. "You're back. Thank God you're back." He took her hand, his warm palm feeling like a lifeline she really needed.

"Adrian..." she whispered, her throat dry and raspy as she struggled to keep her eyes open, overwhelmed by it all. He looked tired, and through her hazy mind, she couldn't quite figure out why. The machines next to her beeped steadily, matching the quick pace of her heart at the sight of him. "What... happened?"

"You got shot," he said, his words hanging heavy in the air as fresh panic flickered in his eyes. "But you're going to be okay. They've stabilized you."

The memory of the gunshot hit her like a jolt. Bits of chaos flashed in her mind—screaming, an invisible weight pressing down on her—but now, she was still alive. Relief coursed through her, mixed with the fear of everything that had happened.

"Adrian," she murmured, trying to focus. "The gunman... did he—"

"Yeah, he confessed," Adrian interrupted, his voice tense but steady. "He admitted

everything and named his employer, someone from another family linked to Aleksander. It's still unfolding, but we'll figure it out. Right now, all that matters is you."

Rhiannon felt a rush of emotions—a mix of gratitude, fear, and love that filled her heart. This was the guy who fought for her, who refused to let darkness take her. "I was scared, Adrian," she admitted, her voice shaking as the weight of her vulnerability hit her. "I thought... I thought I was losing you."

That wasn't all she thought she'd lost, but the other thing—God, what was it? She couldn't remember. Why couldn't she remember?

A flicker of pain crossed Adrian's face at her words, and he moved closer, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "You're never losing me. Not now, not ever." His intensity pulled her back into the warmth of their moment. "I'm right here, and I'm not going anywhere."

Tears welled up in her eyes as she fought against them. What they had shared in those moments between life and death had changed everything. "I love you," she said, the words pouring from her heart.

Adrian's gaze softened, the anguish of the past few hours melting away in his eyes. "I love you too," he replied, the honesty in his voice echoing their strong connection. "Honestly, I've been loving you for months now—I was just too caught up in everything else to say it."

Hearing that made her feel warm inside. "You've been watching over me?" she asked, feeling vulnerable.

"Yeah, Baby. I couldn't help it." A small smile broke through the tension in his voice. "You pulled me, and instead of keeping an eye on your family, I found myself

drifting toward you each time. You made it impossible to look away."

Adrian's words wrapped around her heart, creating a warm cocoon of love and hope. "But what about the family? The business?" She cringed at the thought of her father's expectations looming over her life.

"Forget what they think for a moment," Adrian suggested gently, his thumb brushing soothingly over her knuckles. "What matters is that you're alive. We'll tackle everything else together."

Future... she frowned, her mind buzzing before suddenly everything went quiet, and she realized what had been bothering her since she'd heard him say that.

The sound of footsteps approached, breaking the moment's intimacy. Val came into the room, relief flooding her eyes as she rushed forward. "Rhiannon! You're awake! Thank goodness!" She wrapped her arms around Rhiannon, careful not to bump against the bandage that covered the injury. Rhiannon felt the warmth of her friend around her, a safe space against the lingering fears.

"Hey, Val," Rhiannon managed, her voice still weak but filled with gratitude. "I'm okay. Just... a little shaken."

"More than shaken," Val said, pulling back to look at her critically. "You've been through a lot. But the important thing is you're here now. We were worried sick."

Adrian interjected, "She's a fighter, Val. She pulled through." His eyes gleamed with pride as he glanced back at Rhiannon.

Rhiannon forced a small smile, feeling a grip of love and gratitude constrict around her heart. "Thanks to all of you," she replied, glancing between Val and Adrian, "for being here."

The atmosphere in the room shifted slightly, with the earlier fear easing, though Rhiannon could still feel the weight of what had happened. The worry on her friends' faces reminded her of the danger that still lingered.

"I'm just so glad you're awake," Val continued, her eyes brimming with tears of relief. "The police are investigating everything, and they've already caught the caterer who was involved. They won't let him go until they get everything out of him."

Her words pulled Rhiannon's thoughts away from her personal turmoil for a moment. "Was he working with anyone specific?" she asked, her mind racing. The implications of everything were daunting, intertwining her life and her family in troubling ways.

"From what we heard, he mentioned someone connected to Aleksander," Val replied, her expression tightening. "But it's all still pretty sketchy right now. Just so you know, we won't let you face this alone."

Rhiannon's heart ached at the support surrounding her. Her friends, her family—they were there for her. But as reality settled back in, the doubts and fears began to rear their heads again. "What if he wasn't working alone? What if this is just the start?"

Adrian placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder, drawing her focus back to him. "We'll figure it out. You're one of us now, and the Nikolais always protect what's theirs. You deserve to feel safe."

As the room settled into a comfortable quiet, Rhiannon felt exhaustion wash over her. The adrenaline that had been pumping through her moments before began to fade, and the pain from her injury crept back in, reminding her of what she had been through.

"Get some rest, Rhiannon. The doctor will be here soon," Val said gently, noticing

the weariness on her face. "And we're not going anywhere."

Nodding, Rhiannon allowed her heavy eyelids to close. She felt Adrian's presence beside her, a steady anchor in her swirling thoughts.

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"Adrian," Rhiannon whispered a little later, her voice so hoarse that it tugged at him. "Did you mean it when you said you love me?"

His heart soared at her question. "Are you kidding me?" he replied urgently, letting his feelings spill out. "I'm so fucking in love with you, Rhiannon. You're my everything."

Her expression changed, a hint of vulnerability flashing in her eyes, deepening their connection. "Will you still love me if I say I still want to work in the mafia?"

At his nod, she continued, her voice a whisper and her eyes clouding with tears. "Even if I'm pregnant?"

For a moment, confusion clouded his mind. Pregnant? The weight of her words sank in, and time seemed to freeze. Then, it hit him like a lightning bolt. The stomach bug, her cold shoulder, the way she'd seemed off lately—it all started to make sense now, the pieces clicking together in his mind.

"Wait," he said, his heart racing. "You mean..."

She nodded slightly.

Adrian's pulse quickened, a wave of pure joy washing over him, washing away the dread that had hung over them for too long. "We're having a baby?" he echoed, his eyes sparkling with excitement. His smile broke free, brightening the room. But dread quickly followed, "Rhi, fuck. I need to get the doctor."

They'd done no tests to make sure a child, his child, was still safe. "Adrian?" her voice broke as his mind raced.

"It's all going to be fine, Baby. I'm going to fetch the doctor right now," he promised, already heading out the door, his heart aching when her face crumpled.

Ten minutes later, Adrian returned with the doctor.

"Welcome back, Mrs. Nikolai," she greeted warmly, smiling at his wife. "I'm glad to see you awake. The bullet missed all your major organs; with some recovery, you should be on your feet soon."

Rhiannon nodded, relief washing over her, but then her eyes sharpened. "What about the baby?"

The doctor's expression shifted immediately; her warm smile disappeared, replaced by seriousness. "Well..." she began, and Adrian felt dread fill the room like a thick fog. "We need to do an ultrasound to check things out."

Adrian exchanged a worried glance with Rhiannon as the doctor left, leaving a tense silence hanging in the air. They waited, anxiety crackling as they anticipated news that could change everything.

Soon after, they were directed to the ultrasound room. Adrian held Rhiannon's hand tightly as they sat next to each other on the exam table. His anticipation gnawed at him, worry mixing with the joy of their potential future.

As the doctor started the ultrasound, Adrian's heart raced, each beat sounding louder than the last. He watched the screen anxiously, waiting for signs of their child,

clinging to the tiny flicker of hope that would bind their lives together.

"See?" the doctor said a few moments later. "There's the heartbeat. You're in the early stages of pregnancy—just a few weeks along."

Adrian beamed with pride as the rhythmic pulsing flickered across the screen. They were going to be parents; their child was strong and resilient—just like Rhiannon.

Suddenly, he saw fear re-enter Rhiannon's eyes as she looked up at him. "Adrian, I... I'm so scared about being a parent... about bringing a child into a world like this." Her voice trembled, the weight of her worries hanging heavy.

"Rhiannon," he said, gently stroking her arm to ground her. "I get it, but we can face those fears together. You don't have to do this alone."

She paused, a mix of emotions flitting across her face. "I grew up in a family that didn't show love. I don't want our child to feel neglected or unworthy because of my past."

His heart ached for her. He knew her history; the coldness of her father's influence cast a long shadow over her, but here she was, standing at the edge of motherhood, ready to rewrite everything for their family. "You won't be like him, Rhiannon. You're not your father. You'll never let our child feel unloved or unwanted. You're going to be an amazing mom."

"But what if I do end up like him? What if, no matter how much I try to change it, I still end up being exactly like him?" she whispered, doubt shimmering in her eyes. "What if I become controlling and greedy? What if I hurt our baby like he hurt me?"

He shook his head, determination coloring his voice. "You won't. We're not defined by our past. We can build something better. We'll surround our child with love,

support, and the strength of family. This time, it'll be different because it's us."

The doctor returned, interrupting their moment but not the connection between them. "The ultrasound went well. You're early enough in your pregnancy that there's plenty of time to consider your options," she said, her tone professional yet kind.

"Nobody's going anywhere, right?" Adrian pressed, glancing between Rhiannon and the doctor, needing to hear they would fight for this life together.

"Right," the doctor nodded reassuringly. "As long as you take care of yourself during recovery, everything looks promising. Just regular check-ups and some lifestyle changes, plus the support you both clearly have, will go a long way."

Rhiannon exhaled, a mix of relief and anxiety filling the room. "I just want to give our baby a safe and loving environment," she said softly, her gaze fixed on the screen where the heartbeat pulsed steadily. "They deserve to know they're cherished."

Adrian's heart swelled with pride as he looked at her, her determination igniting a fire within him. "And they will. We'll make sure of that, Rhiannon. Whatever challenges we face, our kid will be surrounded by love, and we've got what it takes to change our family's future."

A flicker of a smile broke through her uncertainty as she met his gaze, a wave of affection washing over him. In that moment, he felt more certain than ever about everything.

The doctor placed a hand on Rhiannon's shoulder, grounding them both again. "I want you two to take a moment to talk. I'll be back soon to answer any questions."

As the door closed, the room shifted back to an intimate space filled with the soft beeping of machines and their breathing. Adrian turned to Rhiannon, his heart racing.

"So, what do you think?"

She leaned back against the pillows, a thoughtful expression crossing her face. "I think this is a lot to take in," she admitted, her brow furrowing slightly. "But I also think... I want to embrace this. I want to build that life we've talked about."

"Then we'll do it together," he promised, feeling her determination anchor him. "I'm not going anywhere, and neither is our baby. This is just the beginning for us."

As they exchanged smiles filled with unspoken hope and love, Adrian felt some of the weight lift. They would face whatever came together, ready to create the family they both wanted.

The tension eased, replaced by a warmth that felt undeniable. Whatever storms lay ahead, they would navigate them hand in hand, heart to heart. With their child—this miracle they would nurture—they would embrace the light ahead with courage.

Rhiannon rested against the pillows, feeling a quiet determination rising within her. Adrian's words echoed in her mind, and for the first time since the chaos of the shooting, she felt a glimmer of hope light up her heart.

"How do you feel about becoming a dad?" she asked, meeting his gaze with curiosity and affection.

Adrian's face broke into a huge smile, making her heart swell. "Honestly? It's kind of terrifying," he admitted, laughter lacing his voice. "I'm still trying to wrap my head around you being pregnant, and now I have to worry about being a dad?"

Rhiannon chuckled softly, feeling lighter at his enthusiasm. "You'll be great at it."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," he replied, leaning in, his expression growing

serious. "But when I think about it, I realize I really want this. I want to be there for you and our kid, to give them the love and support we both missed growing up."

He looked deep into her eyes, and she could see the passion in his commitment to creating a better future. "You deserve that, Rhiannon. You deserve everything good in the world. And so does our child."

Her heart swelled with warmth, wrapping her in a sweet glow. For the first time in a long while, sparks of hope ignited within her—a hope that whispered of love, family, and their chance to redefine their future.

"I want that too," she said softly, tightening her grip on his hand. "I want to be the mother I never had, and with you by my side, I can make that loving environment. I want to protect our kid from everything I went through."

Adrian's expression shifted, a mix of admiration and love flooding his eyes. "You're all heart, Rhiannon. I know you're going to be a great mom. We won't let our past control our future. You've got what it takes."

Just then, the doctor returned, a renewed energy radiating from her. "I have some good news," she announced, brightening the atmosphere. "We confirmed that you're definitely pregnant, and everything looks healthy. Since you're still in the early weeks, we can monitor both of you closely."

Relief washed over Rhiannon, a cleansing wave after the earlier worries. "Thank you," she murmured, gratitude pouring from her heart.

The doctor smiled warmly but shifted slightly, leaning in with a more serious tone. "However, we do need to discuss potential risks. Because of the gunshot, we need to keep a close watch on both your recovery and the pregnancy. It's crucial that you stay stress-free during this time."

Rhiannon nodded, absorbing the doctor's words as her determination hardened. "I'll do whatever it takes to keep our baby safe."

"And I'll be here every step of the way," Adrian added, resolute. "You're not alone in this."

As the doctor continued explaining the necessary precautions and monitoring that would be involved, Rhiannon felt empowerment coursing through her veins. They were a team now, bound by love and a shared commitment to the life they were bringing into the world.

After the doctor finished outlining the next steps, silence enveloped the room, and Adrian turned to Rhiannon, his expression sincere and filled with love. "I know things are going to be complicated—we have a lot on our plate—but I'm excited to face this with you. Together, we can make sure our baby grows up in a world full of love and security."

"I feel the same," she replied, a soft smile lighting up her face. "I'm ready to fight for us—our family."

His face lit up at her words, a rush of pride swelling in his chest. She was a fierce warrior, and now she would be fighting for a future richer than she had ever dreamed.

In that moment, they intertwined their fingers tightly, an unspoken promise standing strong between them.

"Adrian?" Rhiannon asked hesitantly, her expression turning serious. "What if we're not ready for this? What if I'm not ready to be a mom?"

"Then we'll learn together. You're not alone in this, remember?" He shook his head softly, determination threading through his voice. "We'll take it day by day. You'll see

that you're stronger than you think, especially with me by your side."

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A week had passed since Rhiannon woke up to find herself surrounded by love and support, but the reality of her situation had started to sink in. Her physical recovery was progressing; she still felt some soreness as her body healed from the gunshot. However, her spirits were soaring higher than ever. She was eager to embrace life again, push aside the shadows that had chased her for too long, and step into the light that Adrian offered her.

Tonight was special—they were hosting a dinner at their home. At first, she thought about having a smaller gathering with just the Nikolai family, but the idea of finally facing her father and brothers, of revealing the significant changes ahead, excited her. She couldn't wait to see their reactions when she announced her role in the Irish operation and, of course, the news of her pregnancy.

She couldn't wait to prove to them that she could be the woman she'd always wanted to be, as well as a wife and a fucking mother on top of that.

In the days leading up to the dinner, Rhiannon felt uplifted by the sweet moments spent with Adrian, each interaction reinforcing their growing bond. They prepared the house together, laughing as they picked out decorations and arranged the table settings. Warm feelings surged within her every time Adrian leaned down to whisper sweet nothings to her baby bump, a soft smile playing on his lips.

"Hey there, little one," he said one afternoon, his voice tender as he gently caressed her belly. "I already know you're going to be as strong as your mom. Just wait until you see how much love surrounds you."

"Are you trying to bribe our child?" Rhiannon teased, playfully nudging him.

"Maybe," Adrian admitted with a grin, straightening up. "But can you blame me? I just want them to feel welcomed."

Every shared moment felt like a building block for the family they were creating together. As Rhiannon helped with the cooking later, she felt a deep contentment wash over her. The aroma of roasted vegetables filled the kitchen, mingling with laughter as Adrian danced around playfully, twirling her in a way that made her heart sing.

"Just imagine," he said with a cheeky grin, "once our little one is old enough, we'll have them join us in the kitchen. It'll be a family tradition!"

"Maybe we'll have a mini chef on our hands!" she laughed as he pulled her to a stop and kissed her deeply.

"Baby, with our genes, they're more likely to be a sharpshooter," he teased.

Dinner arrived, and the atmosphere in their home was warm and inviting. The table sparkled with fresh flowers, and soft candlelight flickered, creating a cozy vibe. As family members began to arrive, Rhiannon felt a mix of excitement and dread. The Nikolai brothers and their partners settled in, filling the room with chatter and laughter, momentarily distracting her from her nerves.

"Stay close to me," Adrian murmured against her ear, sensing the butterflies stirring in her stomach as her father and brothers walked in. "You've got this."

Once everyone was seated and grace was said, Adrian began steering the conversation toward business. "Before we dive in, we have some important matters to discuss regarding our alliance with Aleksander."

Rhiannon's heart raced—this was the moment they had planned for. As Adrian

detailed the strategies and tactics in response to Aleksander's moves, her resolve strengthened. It was her chance to finally assert herself.

"Following the recent discussions and some challenges that have arisen, it's time for Rhiannon to step into her role within the Irish operation," Adrian announced proudly, turning to her with a smile.

Gasps filled the room, followed by murmured conversations. "Wait, what?" her father said, disbelief dripping from his tone. "You expect her to manage that?"

"Yes," Adrian replied firmly, locking eyes with her father. "And if you or anyone else is against it, let me make this perfectly clear: the Nikolais will cut resources and leave the Irish to bleed. We will not support anyone who undermines her potential."

Rhiannon inhaled sharply, a thrilling mix of anxiety and exhilaration coursing through her veins. Her father's face shifted from disbelief to shock, and she noticed her brothers exchanging glances, concern etched on their faces.

"And," Adrian continued, his gaze still fierce as it bored into her father's, "there's one more thing."

Rhiannon's heart raced as Adrian took her hand, lifting it to reveal the slight bump beneath her dress. "Rhiannon is pregnant. We're expecting a baby."

The room fell silent as everyone absorbed the weight of the announcement. She saw the wide eyes of her father and brothers, their shock palpable.

After what felt like an eternity, her father finally spoke, concern lacing his voice. "You're expecting... a child?"

"Yes, Dad. We are," she replied, keeping her voice steady despite the uncertainty.

"And I intend to be part of the family business. This baby isn't going to grow up in an environment devoid of love. I'll make sure they're surrounded by strength and opportunities, just as I've always wanted for myself."

The silence thickened, and she could sense her father grappling with what she had just declared. Her brothers exchanged glances, uncertainty flickering between them. Rhiannon held her father's gaze, determined not to back down.

"Rhiannon," her father finally said, a subtle softness creeping into his authoritative tone, "this is unexpected."

"It may be unexpected for you, but it's my reality now," she asserted, her heart pounding with conviction. "With or without your support, I'm ready to embrace this opportunity. The baby's future matters more than the past we've lived through."

"But you're putting yourself at risk, Rhiannon," he continued, concern heavy in his words. "The world we're in is dangerous. You're not just a daughter anymore; you'll be a mother. This isn't a game."

Adrian leaned closer to Rhiannon, presenting a united front. "And we're ready to face those risks together. Rhiannon will lead the Irish side of things with strength, and I'm here to support her."

"You stand by her?" her father retorted incredulously. "What do you think this is? A fairy tale?"

"It doesn't have to be a fairy tale to work," Adrian replied, unfazed by the challenge. "But if you disregard her capacity to make an impact and treat her like a pawn again, I assure you the Nikolais will step back from any involvement. It's time for you to recognize Rhiannon for who she is—a formidable force."

Rhiannon's heart swelled at Adrian's words. She felt empowered standing by his side, ready to forge a truth that was entirely her own.

"Well, what about the family?" her father asked, frustration creeping into his voice. "Do you think this is how you'll win people over?"

"No," she interjected, confidence growing bolder. "But this is my choice. I refuse to be caught in the past's web of expectations. You may see a daughter, but I see a businesswoman and a mother. And I expect to lead—especially now that we have this baby."

The air thickened with tension as everyone processed her words, but then she caught the glimmer of pride in Adrian's eyes, giving her the strength to continue.

"I will face all the challenges that come my way, not only for myself but for our family," she asserted, excitement bubbling in her chest. "And I need the support of the people I trust. If that's not possible, then I'll do it alone."

Her father rubbed the bridge of his nose, deep in thought. Rhiannon sensed his resolve waver, and she could almost see the gears turning in his mind. Hopefully, this time, she was not the little girl he could control.

Finally, he murmured, "If this is your decision... then I will support it. We'll need to stay united against external threats, and I trust you can handle the intricacies of the business."

Relief mixed with exhilaration coursed through Rhiannon. She couldn't believe her father was conceding. "Thank you, Dad. I won't let you down."

As the dinner continued, the mood shifted from tension to cautious optimism. Conversations shifted to strategy regarding Aleksander and potential threats,

including how Adrian and Rhiannon would work together within the Irish operation. They brainstormed ideas and strategies, setting solid plans in motion.

As the evening wore on and guests began to leave, Rhiannon leaned into Adrian, satisfaction blooming within her.

"Did you see their faces?" she asked, smiling widely. "I can't believe they actually accepted the news without falling apart."

He shot her a sideways glance, a proud grin breaking across his face. "You're a force, Rhiannon. I knew you could do it. You took charge tonight."

After bidding farewell to their guests, they settled on the couch, the room now peaceful, illuminated by the soft glow of the still-burning candles. Adrian held her close, his hand cradling her baby bump, radiating warmth through her.

"You were amazing tonight." Adrian leaned in, brushing his lips softly against hers. The kiss deepened, igniting the spark of passion that had been waiting for release.

Rhiannon let her hands roam through his hair, surrendering to the chemistry that pulsed between them. The world outside faded away, leaving only the warmth of their connection.

As their kiss grew deeper, Adrian pulled back slightly, breathing heavily with desire. "I love you, Rhiannon."

"I love you too," she responded, feeling the sincerity of her words resonate within her. The weight of the evening's revelations—the pregnancy, her father's acceptance, the promise of a new future—wrapped around them like a warm embrace.

Adrian leaned forward again, capturing her lips in another desperate kiss, sending

shivers down her spine. Each kiss ignited sparks of passion, deepening their connection as if they were trying to bridge the gap of uncertainty life had thrown at them.

"I've missed this," Adrian murmured against her lips, cradling her face as he kissed her again. "I missed you. I missed being close to you."

Rhiannon sighed, fingers tangling in his hair as she pulled him closer. "I've missed you too. I'm so glad we can finally embrace this together."

Feeling a growing urgency, Adrian's hands slipped to her waist, grazing the gentle curve of her baby bump beneath her dress. "You're going to be such an incredible mother," he said softly, his voice filled with affection and his eyes searching hers. "Our baby is so lucky."

Her heart swelled at the thought of their child—a tiny being that would blend the strength of both their legacies. "I want them to know love," she said earnestly, "love and laughter and all the good things in life."

Adrian's expression shifted, warmth heating his gaze. "And they will," he promised, determination threading through his voice. "But right now, they also need to know what it means to have passionate parents."

Rhiannon's breath hitched, love and desire swirling within her. It felt like the air between them crackled with electricity, drawing them closer. She couldn't remember the last time they'd been together, but it had to have been weeks.

"The doctor said it would be fine," he reassured, dropping kisses along her neck.

"Adrian..." she whispered, feeling her pulse quicken as their touches grew more heated. "Are you sure?"

"Always," he silenced her with another kiss, deepening it as his hands explored her body, igniting sensations that made her dizzy. It was intoxicating—every kiss, every caress felt like a drug to her system. Tension built, a pressure inside that made her squirm breathlessly, and when it finally snapped, Adrian surged forward, capturing her lips with fierce intention.

Time lost all meaning as the kiss intensified, filling the space between them with longing and promise. He lifted her effortlessly, cradling her in his arms as he carried her toward their bedroom, their passion rising to meet every shuddering breath.

As they fell onto the soft sheets, Rhiannon felt exhilaration pulse through her. She was ready for this, ready to embrace the intimacy they had set aside amidst the chaos of their lives—a celebration of love that defied the darkness they had faced together.

Adrian's hands caressed her, memorizing every curve. Each touch ignited sparks beneath her skin, melting away any last traces of fear. "This moment is ours, Rhiannon," he said, his voice low and filled with intensity. "Always remember that no matter what happens outside these walls, you have me, and I'll always be here for you."

Her heart swelled at his sincerity, and she nodded, breathing in his comforting scent. "You make me feel alive, Adrian."

As their breaths began to synchronize, he leaned down, brushing his lips against her collarbone, leaving a trail of warmth that made her shiver with anticipation. "And we're just getting started," he whispered before returning to her lips, pouring all his love and desire into that kiss.

Clothes disappeared in moments, and before she even knew it, Rhiannon was crying out as he thrust into her gently, his brow furrowed as he watched himself entering her.

Even now, after all this time, he still felt far too fucking big, his cockhead catching on her entrance with every driving thrust in. It was addicting.

Rhiannon's face burned, at the sight of him watching, at this feeling deep inside her. It was all so much, and for some reason—perhaps the pregnancy—she felt tears pressing against her eyes.

"Adrian," Rhiannon mumbled, and feeling shy, she pressed her face into the corner of his neck, where she could feel his muscles straining as he slowly drove into her.

"Why are you hiding?" he teased, pulling away. His palm hooked around her ass and he curled his body in a way that forced her to look as well. "Look at us, Baby," he murmured, his voice so loving and sweet that it made a tear escape. "Look how fucking beautiful you are."

He looked up, and stalled, his expression panicked. "Why are you crying?"

"I just love you," she sobbed and he relaxed. A smile lit up his face as he spread her legs wider, and started to kick up the pace. Her arms twined around his neck, she didn't want to lose this connection. Rhiannon pulled him closer and pressed a kiss against his lips. "I love you so much."

"I love you too," he answered her, settling the barest amount of his weight atop her writhing body. His hand pressed between them, caressing her belly before it drifted down to her legs. His finger pressing against her clit, and as Rhiannon's climax broke, she let out a cry that he echoed, his thrusts getting faster and harder while outside, the world faded away.

4 months later

Months had flown by since that life-changing night, and the uncertainty that once hung over Rhiannon had melted away, replaced by the cozy routine they'd built while preparing for their little one.

Each morning, Rhiannon would wake up to the sweet sound of Adrian's voice chatting softly to her baby bump—an adorable habit he'd picked up after they returned from the hospital. "Good morning, little one! How did you sleep?" he'd ask, placing his hand over her rounded belly and feeling the unmistakable kicks from within.

"Adrian, I swear you're going to spoil our baby before they even arrive," Rhiannon teased, trying in vain to get a few more minutes of sleep as he leaned down to kiss her.

"Can you blame me?" he said with a playful grin, planting a tender kiss just below her navel, a new little ritual of his. A kiss for her and a kiss for the baby. "I'm just making sure they know how loved they are. Plus, spoiling them is part of my job as their dad!"

Their home had transformed into a cozy sanctuary, lovingly decorated for the baby's arrival. The nursery was filled with warm pastels, and each corner was brimming with thoughtful touches—handmade mobiles, soft blankets, and tiny clothes neatly lined up, all awaiting their new family member. Rhiannon had taken such joy in decorating the space, meticulously planning every detail with Adrian's input, both of them soaking in the happiness of their shared dreams.

Just as they were sharing a sweet moment, their phones buzzed at the same time, pulling their attention away. Adrian picked up his phone first, a wide grin spreading across his face. "It's Amy. She wants us to come to the hospital. She's having the baby!"

Rhiannon's heart soared. "Really?" she asked, excitement bubbling along with a hint of nerves. It wouldn't be long before it was their turn. "Have they picked out a name yet?"

"Dahlia," he murmured, leaning down to give her a quick kiss. "Come on, grab your things, and let's go!"

They rushed to gather their stuff, excitement building as they headed out the door. Rhiannon was already envisioning tiny fingers and the soft cries of a newborn, buzzing with anticipation to share in the joy of Amy's new arrival.

Twenty minutes later, they reached the hospital, greeted by Amy's radiant smile and Valentina's warm presence. "You made it!" Amy exclaimed, clutching her hospital gown, looking proud yet a bit exhausted.

Valentina wrapped her arms around Rhiannon, pulling her close. "Can you believe we're all in this together now? It feels surreal!"

"I know! It's amazing," Rhiannon replied, warmth spreading through her as they walked into the hospital room where Amy lay holding a small bundle in her arms.

"Meet Dahlia," Amy said, her eyes sparkling with joy. She gently unveiled the blanket, revealing a tiny girl with tufts of dark hair and delicate features.

Rhiannon's heart swelled as she gazed at the newborn, a rush of emotion flooding through her. "She's perfect," she whispered, trying to hold back tears.

Adrian leaned closer, standing beside her. "Congratulations, Amy. She's beautiful," he said softly, his voice full of genuine admiration.

In that moment, Rhiannon felt a sense of unity wrap around them—a bond that went beyond words. As they spent the afternoon marveling over Dahlia, sharing stories and laughter, it felt like they were growing even closer as family, all of them stepping into this new chapter of their lives together.

As the sun began to set, painting the sky in stunning shades of orange and pink, Rhiannon exchanged an excited glance with Adrian. They both knew this was just the beginning; their family would soon join this warm and loving community.

Later that evening, as they headed home, the atmosphere was a calm reflection of the joy they'd just experienced. Rhiannon leaned her head against Adrian's shoulder while they settled on the couch, their fingers interlinked. The nursery glowed softly from the light streaming in through the cracks of the door.

"I can't believe how beautiful Dahlia is," Rhiannon said, feeling a warm flutter in her chest.

"Our little one is going to be just as beautiful," Adrian murmured, pulling her in closer, warmth radiating between them. "And I can't fucking wait to meet her."

"Or him," Rhiannon replied, twisting around to give him a kiss, and while he was looking at her, his eyes so earnest and loving, she found herself telling him, "Thank you, Baby. Thank you for being there with me through it all. I don't think I would've been able to do it without you."

"Together," he promised her, his breath skating across her lips. "Always together, Princess. We'll do it all together."

THE END