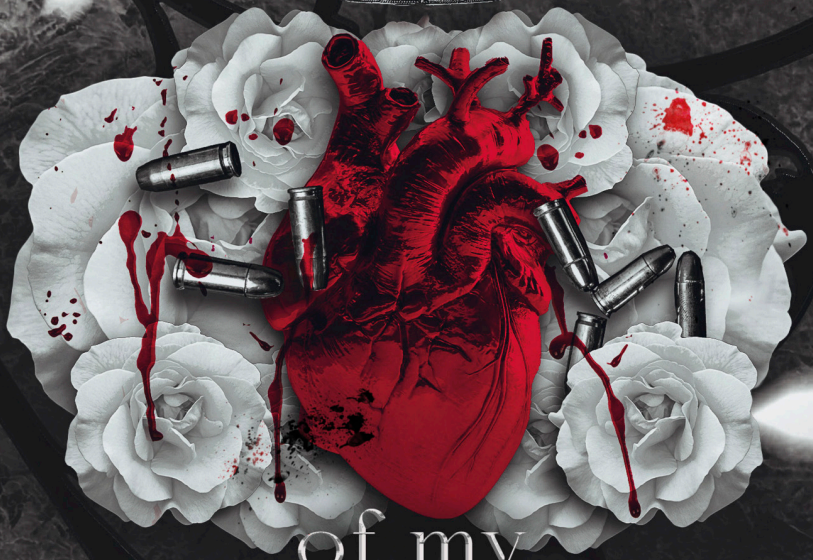
HEART of my MONSTER



MONSTER TRILOGY BOOK THREE

RINA KENT

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HEART of my MONSTER

Rina Kent is a *New York Times, USA Today*, international and No. 1 Amazon bestselling author of everything enemies-to-lovers romance.

She's known to write unapologetic anti-heroes and villains because she often fell in love with men no one roots for herself. Her books are sprinkled with a touch of darkness, a pinch of angst and an unhealthy dose of intensity.

She spends her private days in London laughing like an evil mastermind about adding mayhem to her expanding universe. When she's not writing, Rina travels, hikes and spoils cats in a pure Cat-Lady fashion.

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Also by Rina Kent

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HEART of my MONSTER

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To the beautiful, depraved corner of your soul

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AUTHOR NOTE

Hello, reader friend,

If you're new to my books, you might not know that I write darker stories that can be intense, unsettling, and even disturbing. My characters and their journeys defy societal norms and aren't meant for everyone.

Heart of My Monster is book three of a trilogy and is NOT a standalone.

For more things Rina Kent, visit rinakent.com.

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PLAYLIST

Glasgow—You Me At Six
Just Pretend—Bad Omens
Nothing at All—Traceless
Redeemer—Palaye Royale
Crash—Mokita feat. Charlotte Sands
Best Excuse—Saint Chaos
Rain—grandson & Jessie Reyez
I'll Carry You—Tommee Profitt & Stephen Stanley
Maps—Maroon 5
The Grave—LOWBORN
ROADS UNTRAVELED—Linkin Park
New York—Snow Patrol
7 Minutes—Dean Lewis
Lose My Mind—Dean Lewis
Where's My Love (Acoustic)—SYML
In My Veins—Andrew Belle
Godspeed (Stripped)—Wage War
MY HEAD—Layto
WE MADE PLANS & GOD LAUGHED—
Beauty School Dropout
Happy Together—King Princess & Mark Ronson
Reborn—Talos

You can find the complete playlist on Spotify:

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PROLOGUE
SASHA

AGE SIXTEEN

Catch me if you can!"

My squeal echoes in the air as I jog through the snow. The twins, Erik and Eduard, follow right behind, their steps squishing in the wet slush.

They're wearing pants while I'm in a stupid dress that doesn't allow me to move as much as I want.

I'm screwed.

"You're so dead, Sasha!" Erik shouts, his voice reverberating in the silence.

I'm so tempted to check how far back he is, but that will only slow me down.

My shoes sink in the deep snow. Papa told the staff not to shovel it out of the garden, just the entryway. It's impossible to win the battle against snow in the northern part of the country. And yet my family owns a few vacation houses in these areas due to the stunning, undisturbed nature.

As I sprint the length of the vast garden, my breath

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catches at the sight of the gigantic trees surrounding the property and the calming white that extends as far as the eye can see.

"Damn it, Sasha!" Eduard yells when I slip out of his reach.

I turn around and make a face while still running backward. "So slow, so slow. Can't believe you're supposed to be my age."

A few blond strands escape his beanie and get in his eyes. Eduard shoves them away with clear impatience. We're mostly blonds in this family, but our eyes differ. The identical twins have light blue eyes that can blend with the snow. They're also annoyingly taller than me. It's impossible to jump as high as they can, and they've been rubbing it in my face all through puberty.

However, I'm faster despite wearing a dress, girly shoes, and a soft pink coat to match.

"Cat got your tongue?" I mock. "What's the use of your height if you can't catch me…?"

I trail off when the back of my head bumps against a solid surface. I slowly turn around and wince as Anton, my older brother—and the eldest grandchild—stares down at me.

He's one of the exceptions to the blond genes running in the family. His hair is dark brown and often styled to perfection. While I'm always looking for trouble and riling up my cousins so they'll join in, Anton is the manifestation of collected and a bit boring.

What?

I really can't remember a time he's played something other than annoying board games with me. He says it's to

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teach me critical thinking, but I honestly don't see the point behind it.

"What are you doing, Malyshka?"

Did I mention that he loves scolding me? Because he does, and he does it all the time. He also tends to show love in the strangest ways, like buying me gifts but never giving them to me personally.

I kick the snow. "Just playing."

Erik and Eduard touch me on each shoulder, grin like Cheshire cats, and scream at the same time, "We won!"

"No, you didn't. This doesn't count!"

But they're already running back to the house, only turning around to make gloating faces at me.

I glare up at Anton. "It's all because of you. Why did you have to be here?"

Anton raises a perfect brow. "Shouldn't I be the one who asks that? Aren't you supposed to be waiting inside like Mama said?"

"Yeah, well. It's boring to stay inside all day. And Babushka would be like: *Sit properly, Sasha! Stop being a clown, Sasha! Don't make me repeat myself, Sasha!* And then she'd correct my posture with her cane." I huff. "I hate that thing."

My brother shakes his head more in resignation than anger. "You're never going to grow up, are you?"

I throw my hands in the air. "What's so fun about growing up anyway? Besides, you're grown up enough for the both of us."

His lips twitch in a smile as he grabs me by the nape and starts dragging me back to the house. "It's time for dinner."

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"No!" I try to wiggle out of his hold to no avail. "It's still too early."

"Stop acting like a baby."

"But I don't want to. Leave me alone, Tosha."

He only tightens his grip and basically pushes me inside the house and deposits me like I'm a sack of potatoes.

A joyful atmosphere explodes all at once. Christmas vibes spill in front of us like a royal feast. A few trees decorate the circular entrance hall, and a huge one stands in the middle, nearly reaching the chandelier hanging from the ceiling at the end of the second floor.

It sparkles and glitters with dozens of golden ornaments and blinking lights. It's even surrounded by a ton of snow and there's a real snowman beside it that the twins and I insisted on bringing in.

Papa ordered for it to be preserved with some special freezing method since the house is warm.

Excitement, chatter, and endless footsteps echo around the house. The staff is busy carrying dishes, preparing the dining table, and making sure everything is as impeccable as Babushka instructed.

Yes, Papa and my uncles take care of business, but she's the absolute monarch of this house. My uncles' wives call her the queen dowager behind her back, but Mama never joins in the slandering my aunts enjoy.

She's just too nice and wouldn't participate in anything that hurts others—including my impossibly strict Babushka, who hardly likes anyone or anything.

Anton is the exception, probably because he's cut from the same authoritarian cloth as she is. He's never lived his life,

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never had any form of fun, and he's always concentrated on either his studies or whatever he does with Papa for "work."

"Malyshka!"

I wince at Mama's voice, and my bastard of a brother releases me with a small twitch of his lips.

Mama stands in front of me with a hand on her hip. She's a tall, absolutely stunning woman with dark hair, a round face, and big hazel eyes that she passed down to me.

Her dress for the night is a simple dark green one that stops above her knees, but it hugs her figure in all the right places and makes her look no different than a model. I've come to the realization that she might be a vampire, because she hasn't aged one bit since I was young.

"Hi, Mama." I play with the belt of my coat.

"Don't hi me, young lady." She reaches into her cross-body bag and retrieves a small brush. She always has these little kits and emergency stuff that can be used for everything. "You look like a rat who's out of the sewer. Didn't I tell you to be presentable, at least for today?"

"That's what I said," Anton adds needlessly. "Apparently, your daughter wants to act like she's ten forever."

I glare up at him, and he merely watches me with that stupid blank expression of his. I swear to God, he's growing up to be a second Babushka—minus the cane.

Maybe one day, he'll inherit our grandmother's cane and chase me out of the house with it.

Mama undoes the buttons of my coat and removes it in swift, firm movements. "I guess I should be glad that you didn't smudge or tear your dress yet. I don't even know what to do with you anymore, Malyshka."

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She gives the light pink lace a little fluff and adjusts the ribbon at my waist, then brushes my hair.

"I'm okay, Mama. Look." I pull at my dress. "It's all good."

"Your shoes are ruined!" She rushes to the cabinet underneath the stairs and comes back with a second pair that looks exactly like what I'm wearing. Only Mama would buy duplicates of things because she knows I'll destroy them in no time.

She helps me change my shoes while Anton just shakes his head like a bastard. He could've left or something, but he's leaning against the wall, arms and ankles crossed, looking pristine in his suit and judging me six ways to Sunday.

He's also enjoying watching me being scolded until eternity by our mother.

All I get to do is lower my head and take it with a pout. If I attempt to defend myself, she'll really give me an earful. Not that I have too many arguments that could work in my favor.

The office door opens, and Papa steps out with Uncle Albert. My papa, Akim Ivanov, is the most handsome, compassionate, and charismatic man I know. I don't care that those who work for him think he's as authoritarian as Babushka. He's not that way with me or with the rest of the family, and that's all that matters.

Anton takes after him in almost everything except for the dark hair. I'm the opposite, yet I have Papa's golden hair.

Upon seeing me, he smiles. "Sasha!"

I release myself from Mama's merciless hold and run into his open arms. He embraces me and kisses the top of my head. "You look so good, my Sashenka."

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"That's only because I salvaged the situation last minute," Mama says from behind me with a huff.

"And I prevented a disaster from happening," my brother supplies.

"Sasha will always be Sasha," Uncle Albert says with a heartfelt laugh.

"That's my charm." I smile coyly at my father. "Right, Papa?"

He caresses my head. "Correct. You'll be my little girl forever."

"Yes!"

"Don't encourage her, Akim," Mama scolds him as well. "You're the reason she's like this."

"I agree." Anton stands beside our mother. "You're spoiling her too much, Papa."

"I don't care. I want her to stay young for as long as possible." He hugs me again, and I nuzzle my nose in his chest.

Papa smells like winter. Harsh on the outside but with a warm core on the inside. He feels like an anchor that can never be snatched away.

Mama and Anton—who belong to the tough love club—shake their heads as Papa holds me by the shoulder and leads me to the dining room.

Everyone is already inside, chatting among themselves and starting to take their seats. The dining room is majestically decorated with a Christmas theme. The long table takes up most of the room, overflowing with countless dishes covered with golden cloches. Matching utensils are aesthetically placed in front of every seat.

Erik and Eduard both make a face, and I make one back as I grab on to Papa.

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Uncle Anatoly intercepts Papa and Uncle Albert—and me. He's the youngest of my uncles, and the twins' father. He's leaner than Papa but is the same height and has similar features. His face is closed off, and he has dark circles beneath his eyes.

Papa is the most handsome, Uncle Albert is the least, so that puts Uncle Anatoly right in the middle. He's also funny and has made cracking jokes his entire personality.

Not lately, though.

In the past few months, it looks as if life has been sucked out of him and left a soulless skeleton in its wake.

I've noticed some changes in Uncle Albert, too. He usually has time to indulge us in playing or assembling something we buy, but not lately.

Only Papa is an unchanging anchor, short of some dark circles because he's been spending a lot of time in the office lately.

"What have you decided?" Uncle Anatoly asks in a low voice.

"This is not the time," Uncle Albert whispers back.

"You shut up!" Uncle Anatoly hisses. "We should've stopped this before it got to this stage, but no, we had to hold on to a sinking fucking ship—"

Without letting me go, Papa reaches out his free hand and squeezes his shoulder. "Not another word, Anatoly. This is neither the time nor the place. I need you to get yourself together. Go sit beside your wife and children and be an Ivanov. Control that turbulent energy of yours and calm the fuck down."

Shivers break on my skin even though the words aren't

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directed at me. This…is the first time I've heard Papa be so…insensitive.

It's clear that Uncle Anatoly is suffering with something, but instead of offering him any form of comfort, Papa all but humiliated him. No, maybe humiliating is a strong word. He *scolded* him.

In no time, a smile lifts Papa's lips, and it's like he's flipped a switch to return back to the father I know. "We'll talk after dinner."

Uncle Anatoly glares at both of them. "We're in immediate danger, and all you care about is a stupid fucking dinner?"

He shakes his head and, without waiting for an answer, walks to his wife, then flops down beside her while wearing a solemn expression.

"Never mind your Uncle Anatoly, Sashenka. He's just tired." Papa kisses the top of my head. "Go take your seat."

I smooch his cheek and then trudge toward my chair. When a leg trips me and I nearly fall, Erik's and Eduard's shoulders shake with suppressed laughter.

Oh, you want to play?

I push Erik's chair and both of them almost tumble to the ground.

A cane taps on the ground, and I straighten. Babushka, who's at the head of the table, narrows her eyes on me and I smile and then sit beside the twins. These bastards want to see me die by our grandmother's cane.

After everyone is seated, Babushka nods at the head maid, who's as stoic as she is, and the lady motions to the rest of the staff to remove the cloches.

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Sounds of appreciation fill the room as countless smells tickle our noses. There are different types of soup, a giant roasted lamb, and some of the vegetables are shaped like Christmas trees and stars.

We start eating, and chatter echoes around us. Erik and Eduard try to annoy me, but I kick and pinch them underneath the table until they whine out loud. This time, they're the ones who get Babushka's stare of disapproval.

Papa's chief of security rushes inside the hall, his face contorted with exertion. This is the first time I've seen him distressed and on edge.

Papa's harsh gaze turns to him. "Didn't I tell you not to bother us during family dinners?"

"This is an emergency, sir. The central security system was disabled, and I'm getting no updates from the guards stationed outside—"

His words cut off when a red laser dot appears on his forehead, and then it's blown to bits. Blood splashes on the Christmas decorations and the food in front of two of my cousins as the man drops with a thud.

A scream rips from somewhere in the room, but I can't look away from the man. When I finally lift my gaze, I find small red dots on Mama's forehead, chest, and stomach. Papa's, too.

Everyone has those laser dots.

Oh, no.

No.

Harsh footsteps echo outside, sounding as if they're coming from underground. No, maybe they're coming from a parallel universe.

My hopeful thoughts are slaughtered when countless

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men spill inside the dining room. They're dressed in black combat gear, heavy boots, and thick helmets, their faces hidden with balaclavas, and are carrying long rifles that are slung across their chests. The only time I've seen anything like this was in a movie about the Second World War. I hated that movie. It was all about the siege, young men dying, and rotting cadavers in the street.

It was about the worst time for humanity, where greed and power killed millions and millions of innocent people.

Why does this feel like I'm in that time?

"Everyone down!!" Papa yells and clutches Mama by the nape, but before he can push her to the floor, blood explodes on his chest, and he looks at me even as his eyes start to roll back.

Mama shrieks, but it's cut off when half of her head is blown away.

I scream and scream and scream, but my voice isn't heard in the middle of the shooting and other horrified shrieks. The soldiers are like robots, eliminating one person after the other.

Uncle Anatoly grabs his pregnant wife and starts to pull her toward him, but she's hit in her belly. He retrieves his gun and screams as he fires and empties it without any aim or sense of direction. Before he can finish, he's shot in the back and falls in his dead wife's pool of blood.

Pop.

Pop.

Pop.

All of a sudden, everything turns black.

The screams, wails, and raw shrieks don't disappear, though. Many things don't.

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The gunshots.

The tangy stench of blood.

The wails and sobs.

The infants' cries.

The women's terrified yells.

I think it's a nightmare, which is why I'm not seeing anything, but then, I realize I've been pushed under the table, facedown, on the carpet. Slowly, I lift my head.

"Shh." Erik places a shaky hand over my mouth, tears clinging to his eyelashes. "Stop screaming…Sasha, please…"

I breathe against his palm. I'm not sure, but I think I've been screaming ever since I saw my parents being killed.

"It's okay," Erik whispers even as he trembles, his teary eyes filling with unprecedented terror.

Did he also witness his parents being murdered? Did he… Where's Eduard? Anton?

I latch on to Erik's hand with both of mine, and he hugs me to his chest. Eduard is shielding us both, I realize, and so are Timur and Gavriil—Uncle Albert's sons. They're circling us as Erik and I curl on the ground together, crammed in the small space between the table and the wall.

My fingers tighten around Erik's back. We shake against each other, hiding our faces in one another's damp necks. Our hearts beat so loud, I feel like they'll explode any second. My eyes are shut so tightly that they hurt.

A weight falls on me, and I cry, jerking violently against Erik. Something hot trickles down my head and face, and I open my eyes a little.

Blood drenches my soft pink dress and the top of Erik's head, his cheeks, and his neck. I stare up, and my mouth opens when I see Eduard's and Timur's lifeless eyes. Holes

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riddle their chests, and half of Timur's face is gone. Gavriil is also clutching his middle and screaming as blood pours out of him.

"No…" Erik sobs, reaching for his twin.

He releases me, his face ashen, and tears streak down the blood on his cheeks.

"Erik…no…don't…don't go…" I desperately hold on to his wrist with my unsteady hand. If he sits up, they'll know he's alive—

His body jerks back, and I'm about to scream, but he falls on top of me. The weight of his lifeless body suffocates me and I stop breathing.

For a moment, I think I was hit, too.

But if I were, would I still hear the gunshots? Would I feel the blood that's soaking me?

The shrieks and screams have died down, but the gunshots haven't. They keep going on and on and *on*.

All I can do is tremble and cry silently while covered by my dead cousins and a pool of blood.

At this moment, all I wish for is death.

I wish and wish…

But it never comes.

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1
KIRILL

Today is my wedding day.

Which happens to be the second in the span of a week.

And while I don't believe in wedding fever or the institution of marriage itself, certain circumstances have made this outcome inevitable.

This whole process is necessary for the survival of the house of cards. It won't be long before the chess pieces take their places on the board.

Truth is, they've been where they're supposed to be from the start.

Everything is going exactly according to plan.

The church brims with people. At the top of the food chain, there's the Pakhan, the leaders of the brotherhood, and the rest of the members from different organizations.

They're here to witness the birth of the new man all dealings will go through.

A.k.a. me.

Considering the importance of this event, the church

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is littered with security details from all factions. However, Viktor is the one who's leading the process. I don't trust anyone else to make this wedding a success.

Most of my men are stationed inside, while the others are guarding the external perimeter. I can leave it to Viktor to come up with the best security plans.

I check my watch and frown when I don't find an update from Maksim. He should've gotten in touch by now.

Unless…he was killed?

I internally shake my head. He couldn't be dead. Maksim is one of my best men, second best after Viktor in combat, so there's no one better than him to take care of this loose end.

"Sir?"

I lift my head to stare at the priest. Wrinkles of age surround his eyes as he carefully looks between me and my supposed wife-to-be. Perhaps I spent too long staring at my watch and ignoring the robot of a woman who shouldn't be anyone's wife.

But she will be.

If everything goes according to plan.

"I apologize," I say, letting a charming smile tug at my lips. "I'm so eager to take my wife home that I'm counting the minutes."

Scattered laughter fills the hall. The priest smiles and mumbles that it's okay.

Kristina, however, is nowhere near amused. She looks too pale, as if she'll pass out any second now.

That's it, robot. Show emotions for once in your miserable life.

"You can proceed," I tell the priest and grab Kristina's

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gloved hands in mine. They're frigid cold, like her expression and corpse-like presence.

Her deep blue eyes look into mine, but they're lifeless, and the wrong fucking color.

The only color I approve of belongs to those eyes that flicker between green, brown, and yellow in a symphony of emotions.

Her hands were warm, too, when I held them, and she couldn't stop smiling. She even pinched her thigh when she thought I wasn't looking.

And when I said "I do," a sheen covered her eyes as they turned a bright, glittery yellow and green. She was so overwhelmed with emotions, she looked to be choked by them.

This one, though? It's like she's having a fucking stroke. And not because of emotions, but more due to the lack thereof.

Should I make it worse?

To be completely honest, I don't believe this woman can ever be useful in my schemes, but if what I gathered about the situation is correct, then it might be worth a try.

I cast a glance at the first bench, where Yulia sits with my sister Karina, who's barely hanging in there. I told her she didn't have to attend the wedding, but she vehemently refused and had Anna accompany her. The old woman is holding my sister's hand—to Yulia's dismay. Needless to say, my dear mother didn't want either of them to attend since, according to her sociopathic thinking, they ruin the family's image.

In fact, she was against this entire wedding happening, and it shows in the lasers she keeps shooting from her rancid eyes.

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But the star of this theatrical drama is notably absent.

Igor, his wife, and his son, on the other hand, are watching the show intently on the bride's side. Or more like, they're focused on Kristina and her frosty fucking demeanor.

She follows my line of vision, stares at Yulia—or who is supposed to be sitting beside Yulia—then she subtly turns to the priest.

"Do you, Kristina Petrova, take Kirill Morozov to be your husband, to live together in holy matrimony, to love him, to honor him, to comfort him, and to keep him in sickness and in health, forsaking all others, for as long as you both shall live?"

Her eyes focus on mine intently, but it's like she's not seeing me. Or perhaps she's seeing someone else in my lifeless gaze.

"I…" She chokes on the word, swallows, then closes her eyes for a brief second.

She sways on her feet, and a better man would reach out to steady her, but where's the drama in that?

From my peripheral vision, I catch Igor sitting taller and growing more agitated the longer his daughter remains silent.

"Kristina?" the priest asks as a low murmur breaks out in the crowd.

She opens her eyes, but when she looks at me, there are tears in them, even as her expression remains the same.

My, my. Who knew the robot was capable of feeling?

I didn't expect much from her today, so this is going way better than I anticipated.

"Is everything okay?" I say loud enough for the front

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row to hear. I need Igor to listen to me being an absolute gentleman to his daughter, who's fucking up his image as we speak.

Her lips tremble, and she whispers so low that I can barely hear her, "I can't…"

"It's just an 'I do,' Kristina. Say it."

She shakes her head.

"Everyone is watching, including your papa." My tone turns sinister, provocative. "Say. It."

"No! I can't!" she screams at the top of her lungs. This time, not only do *I* hear it, but the entire audience does, too.

This is really going above and beyond what I knew was coming.

Kristina screaming? In public? *At all*, for that matter? And with so many emotions?

Someone call the apathy police.

I didn't think she was capable of saying anything that didn't sound like a real-life imitation of a robot.

Without another word, she grabs the material of her wedding dress, hikes it up, and runs out of the church, leaving me stranded at the altar.

From the outside looking in, I should be either mad or humiliated. In reality, I'm barely stopping myself from breaking out in laughter.

Now, that's how it's done.

The crowd goes silent, but only for a beat before their voices rise and all heads turn toward a red-faced Igor and me.

Time to be a hero.

"Everyone." I speak to them in a calm, completely unfazed voice. "Seems that Kristina is a bit too emotional right now. Please remain seated. We will be back shortly."

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I stride out of the church, tuning out the looks and the vain gossip. As soon as I'm out the door, Viktor falls in step at my side.

"Anything from Maksim?" I ask as I loosen my bow tie.

"Not yet, Boss."

Fuck.

"Keep trying to reach him." I stop outside the church and face him. "Where's Yuri?"

"He said he was feeling sick and had to go back to the house."

Hmm. Not like him to miss such an event, but I'll give him the benefit of the doubt. Both he and Maksim have been such assholes ever since I sent Sasha away, even though she said she wanted to leave.

Karina, too.

I caught her and Maksim having coffee together like when Sasha was with them. But instead of laughing and joking around, they were sighing like old ladies.

Then those insolent little shits confronted me about it and nearly got punched in the process. Yuri, on the other hand, stood there and glared at me. He schooled his expression when I looked at him, but I don't like it.

I'll have to look into that after I take care of this situation. One thing at a time.

"Block the exit," I tell Viktor. "No car leaves until I say so."

He nods and strides toward the entrance.

I take the route in the opposite direction, a hand in my pocket and a small smile on my face. Sure enough, Kristina has gone to the back entrance, where there's a parking lot that's usually used by the staff.

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Although she was running, she wasn't fast, considering the heels and the impossibly long wedding dress. By the time I arrive, she's jogging all over the parking lot. Her tears come faster the more she frantically circles the cars and doesn't find what she's looking for.

I hide around the corner and check my watch. At this rate, I'll get back to my *actual* wife sooner than I previously calculated.

But for now, I'm only missing popcorn for the movie that I made sure would happen.

Kristina's headless-chicken phase comes to a halt and the ex-robot actually sobs. "Where are you? I came as you asked… Where are you—"

She cuts herself off and lets her dress drop to the ground as none other than my ex-baby brother—he's a fucking giant now—emerges from between the cars. He has a hand in his pocket and the other holds a gun as he breathes harshly.

"Konstantin…" she lets out in a murmur.

"You came," he whispers back, his face appearing boyish, like he's a decade younger.

A bit of a weird moment to witness.

Kristina takes a hesitant step toward him. "I…couldn't do it. Even if my parents disown me and my brother kills me, I couldn't…couldn't marry Kirill when all I can see is you in his face. I just…couldn't."

"Good, because if you didn't come, I was planning to kidnap you and hold you hostage before my fucker of a brother could marry you."

Fuck you, asshole. If it weren't for me, none of this would be happening.

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"Oh, Konstantin." She palms his cheek. "I love you. I lived all my life for duty and accepted being my family's trump card. I didn't allow myself to feel or live or breathe for anything but duty, but that changed when *you* came along. I hate you for making me feel, but I wouldn't have it any other way."

He clutches her by the waist and hauls her toward him. "I love you, too, Meelaya. You're the only reason I manage to wake up every day."

And then he kisses her, open-mouthed, while releasing repulsive noises.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes or cringe for eternity as I snap a few pictures.

Only my brother is cheesy enough to pick the most sickeningly sweet term to call his woman. *My darling.*

Though it surprisingly fits someone like Kristina.

When they break apart, she smiles and wipes the lipstick off his mouth. "What are we going to do now? If Papa sees you… I don't even want to think about it. And Kirill? What is he going to do to you?"

"Fuck that asshole."

Hey. Is this all the thanks I get for my services?

"Let's leave," he lets out in a determined tone. "No one will approve of us when you stranded my almighty bastard of a brother at the altar. The blame will fall on you more than me, and I don't want to see you suffer in this world."

"But…Papa and Alexei will hunt us down." She visibly shakes against him. "You don't know my brother. He's not as diplomatic as Papa, and he'll kill you on sight. I can't…I can't do that to you."

"I'm willing to take the risk if it means being with you."

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"But…what about your goals and aspirations?"

"I don't need those if I have to achieve them without you."

I finally get enough of my cheesy fucking brother and stroll out from my hideout clapping my hands. "Bravo! Love the concept of forbidden love. The execution, however, could use better dialogue."

Both of them stiffen, and Konstantin actually hides Kristina behind him as if I'll snatch her away or something.

Now, I'm fully aware that my brother isn't as trigger happy as, say, Damien, but he still has his moments, and right now seems to be one of those as he tightens his hold around the gun that he never hid.

"Care to explain what you're doing with my future wife, Konstantin?"

His upper lip lifts in a snarl. "She's never going to be your wife. She's fucking mine."

I guard my nonchalant tone. "Is that so? Did you discuss this issue with Igor? Alexei? The Pakhan, for that matter? Because as I'm sure you know, this is highly frowned upon by the brotherhood. A bit taboo, too. Her neck is on the line, and, hey, so is yours."

"Let her go," he says almost pleadingly.

My brother has never begged me for anything since the day I enlisted. He hasn't asked me for anything, either, and has only talked to me to act as Yulia's obedient minion.

We haven't been on good terms since the day Karina was traumatized for life, but when I decided to leave, he looked at me with these same imploring eyes.

The ones a younger brother would have for his older brother.

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Back then, he said, "Please don't leave us."

Now, he says, "You're powerful enough to break this marriage off."

"That I am, but I'm afraid I can't be the one who goes against the deal I had with Igor and the Pakhan. Otherwise, my interests will be in jeopardy."

"Kirill." He's struggling to remain calm when I'm sure all he wants is to punch me. "Can you, for one day, one *fucking* day, just stop being so selfish and do something for me?"

"Why would I? You said I was no longer your brother the day I left for Russia, no? Am I suddenly back to being your brother now that you need me? Besides, I'm doing you a huge favor right now. Why do you think I got you riled up a few days ago?"

His eyes widen and recognition starts to show in his gaze.

So maybe I was being an asshole and told Konstantin that I look forward to having a wife that will serve me every night. I was thinking of a different wife, but he didn't know that, and he would have punched me if I hadn't moved out of the way.

That was how I confirmed my suspicions. That, and I saw them together during the engagement party. I couldn't reveal anything back then, because I needed the wedding ceremony to happen.

Konstantin and Kristina look like ghosts, too caught up in their little romance to realize they're not the ones holding all the cards in this game.

I already built them a nice tidy house of cards, and if they play right, I might choose not to destroy it.

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"You…did that on purpose?" my brother asks.

"Maybe."

"You knew?"

"Perhaps."

"Then why?" Konstantin breathes heavily. "Why the fuck did you make a deal that includes marrying *my* woman?"

"Because she wasn't your woman in public, and I had an opening to achieve greater purposes, so I took it."

"You fucking—"

"Calm your fucking tits." I stand toe to toe with him. "Igor, Alexei, and the Pakhan are on their way here. They might bring their guards or the entire wedding party, though I doubt it, because I sent Igor and Alexei this nice and tidy picture of you two kissing."

I unlock my phone and show them evidence of their cringey make-out session.

Kristina trembles and pushes Konstantin away. "Go! Leave! They won't kill me, but they will definitely kill you."

"No," my brother growls. "They might not kill you physically, but they'll still sell you to the highest bidder. If it's not Kirill, then it'll be someone else."

"Please go, Kosta." She desperately pushes him while crying, but he's not moving. "Please, I'm begging you."

"I'm not leaving without you." He clutches her waist and pulls her to his side.

"And lose everything you and Yulia have been building?" I ask in my patronizing tone.

"I don't give a fuck."

"I'm sure you do. Kristina is right. Her father and brother will hunt you down and kill you for sullying her

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honor. Besides, do you want her to live frightened for the rest of her life? And how about you? You're an ambitious man with lots of plans for the future. Will you be able to handle being cast aside with no option but running?"

"We don't have a choice since you refuse to help."

"Who says I refuse?" I raise a brow. "In fact, I'm going to give you the chance of your life. All you have to do is agree with what I say."

He narrows his eyes. "What are you planning now?"

"Something nice," I whisper. "Here we go."

As expected, only Igor, Alexei, and the Pakhan show up. Kristina partially hides behind Konstantin. The idiots have probably been seeing each other in secret for a long time, but only got their shit together and confessed their undying love when everything came tumbling down. But oh well. It played in my favor.

"Kristina!" Igor snaps. "What is the meaning of this?"

She seals her lips shut then murmurs, "I… I love Konstantin. I always have."

Alexei raises a hand, probably to strike her or yank her away, but my brother catches it and glares at him. "Don't fucking touch her."

Alexei is a large man but around the same height as my brother, yet he still looks down his nose at him. "Step away from my sister before I kill you."

"Now, now." I effortlessly disengage them by standing between them. "There's no need for violence on a happy day."

"You'll marry Kirill this instant," Igor tells his daughter, to which she shakes her head and sinks her nails into Konstantin's jacket.

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"I'm afraid I can't marry another man's woman, Igor. Especially if that man is my own brother."

Igor's face contorts. "We made a deal."

"Yes, and you didn't keep your part of it. I was promised your daughter, but I come here to find out that not only does she already have a man, but she's also pregnant."

Everyone falls silent, Konstantin and Kristina included.

Of course she's not pregnant, but it doesn't hurt to add more salt to Igor's wound. Besides, this plays an important role in the next part of my plan.

"You fucking bastard!" Alexei lunges at my brother again, and this time, I move out of the way so he can punch him.

He needed to get that one in to somehow lessen his anger. Kristina shrieks as blood explodes out of Konstantin's nose.

When Alexei lifts his fist again, I'm the one who blocks it and glares at him. "I let you punch him the first time out of courtesy, but if you hit my brother again, I'll break your legs."

I catch Konstantin's lips parting in my peripheral vision, and he looks like an absolute idiot.

So yes, I might have issues with him, but no one fucks with my brother.

"Alexei." Igor shakes his head at his son and he retreats back a step.

I look at the Pakhan, whose reign ends today. He's been watching the show with disapproving silence. Sergei isn't a fool and is probably working out exactly where this is going.

"Since Igor's side is the one that pulled out of the deal, as evidenced by Kristina abandoning me at the altar and

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