

Hot and Bothered
Ivan (Her Russian Protector 1.3)
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By Roxie Rivera

Bumping my car door closed with my hip, I tapped my thumb against the screen of my phone and answered Lena's earlier text about our upcoming Thanksgiving Day plans. Ivan and I had offered to host the holiday for our tight-knit group of friends, and it looked as if we would have a full table.

Benny and Dimitri were getting close to their wedding date and didn't have the time or energy to put together a spread for themselves, especially not while trying to juggle their new businesses and a pregnancy. Neither Lena nor Yuri could cook and Vivian didn't have any other family except for her cousin Eric who would spend the holiday with his mother and siblings. Nikolai still remained questionable but Ivan assured me he would attend if for no other reason than to have an excuse to drive Vivian. I wasn't sure what I thought about that.

Were you in class? You took forever to answer!

I could practically hear the pouting tone in Lena's message and smiled as I snatched my backpack from the backseat of my car.

No. I was driving. Ivan doesn't like it when I text and drive.

I didn't tell her that he'd caught me breaking one of his driving rules a few weeks earlier and had punished me in that way he somehow made so breathtakingly sexy. One playful yet stern spanking had put an end to that dangerous habit. My poor bottom had been red-hot and stinging for a full day by the time my big, handsome Russian was done with me.

Of course, he had kissed my aching, hot flesh and used that wicked mouth of his to make it all better. Even now, nearly a month later, I clenched my thighs together to assuage the pulsing need deep in my core at the mere memory of the way he had thoroughly worked me over and then made love to me until I couldn't even remember my name.

Oh. Well. Safety first. So—Yuri said he'll bring the wine and spirits. Can I maybe buy the flowers for the centerpieces?

Hefting my backpack higher on my shoulder, I figured that was the safest option. I had seen and tasted Lena's few attempts at cooking. Letting her buy flowers was best for everyone.

Sounds good. I'll call you later.

Works for me. Don't forget about our breakfast date tomorrow!

I won't.

We were getting together to finalize the details for Benny's bachelorette party. Because she had that tiny baby growing in her tummy, we definitely wouldn't be doing anything wild and crazy. Lena had pitched the idea of a day at the spa and an evening at the penthouse Yuri no longer used. If Vivian was onboard with the plan, we would run with it and make one of Benny's last nights as a single woman a bash to remember.

Scrolling down my social media alerts, I headed for the front door of the warehouse that contained Ivan's gym and training center. The rundown façade of the building always made me want to run to my doctor for a Tetanus booster. I still remembered the jarring experience of discovering the bright, clean and ultra-modern exterior with its state of the art equipment.

In some ways, the warehouse was a lot like its owner. Ivan's burly stature combined with the myriad gang tattoos marking his hands and neck and the off-putting scowl he typically wore on that harsh but handsome face weren't the most inviting. But, once you got beyond that frightening exterior, he was the sweetest, gentlest, most amazing man on the planet. I went to bed every night thanking my lucky stars that I had been thrown into his path and that he had been willing to help me when no one else would.

Pushing on the heavy door of the warehouse, I stepped inside the chilly interior and whipped off my sunglasses. Used to the stares of the men who trained at Ivan's center, I paid them little attention as I tucked my sunglasses and phone into the front pocket of my backpack. Other than the female receptionist who had lasted one week with the testosterone heavy, alpha male clientele, I was the only woman Ivan allowed inside the front doors. Not even the wives and girlfriends of the fighters who trained here were allowed entrance.

I didn't abuse that privilege. Until recently, I had only stopped by the gym with Ivan if he needed to pop in and sign forms or deal with business when we were headed out on a date or to do boring, everyday couple things like grocery shopping. He had made it very clear to the men who trained under him that I was off-limits and that he wouldn't tolerate any catcalling. I felt extremely safe and comfortable around the fighters but I didn't push it by being overly friendly with any of them.

Though I never dressed immodestly, I always tried to make sure the hems of my dresses didn't flirt too high upon my thighs and that my necklines weren't very daring. While I enjoyed the attention I received from Ivan when I vamped it up a bit, I didn't want to encourage the wrong idea from other guys. There was a time and a place to dress like a knockout and this gym packed with men forced into celibacy as part of their training wasn't it. As Ivan had once put it, that would be like waving a steak in front of a starving lion.

There was only one man I wanted feasting on my body—and he was standing in the central cage taking on Sergei, the only underground bare-knuckle fighter he trained and the man everyone called his protégé. Standing just under seven feet tall, Sergei actually made my Ivan look normal-sized. They both sported the same insanely broad shoulders and muscular physiques only Ivan had tattoos marking almost all of the skin visible.

Taken aback by the sight of Ivan sparring in just shorts and a thin helmet, I remained rooted to the spot. In all the times I had come here, I had never once seen Ivan actually fighting. Any time his fighters had been sparring, Ivan had always stood just outside the cage or in one of the corners where he shouted pointers in that bellowing, gruff voice of his. To see him charging Sergei and successfully taking down the younger, bigger man made me gasp.

Judging by the shouts and whistles from the men watching the fight, I wasn't the only one impressed. Sergei's shocked expression betrayed his surprise. A second later, he looked determined to escape the choke-hold Ivan had placed on him, but the tree

trunk legs wrapped around his body and crushing his ribs made it impossible. I swallowed hard as Sergei was finally forced to tap out and accept Ivan's help to get to his feet. Spitting out his mouth guard, Ivan started rattle off pointers in their shared language. Though I had been diligently practicing my Russian every day, I only caught snippets of the conversation.

Jamming his mouth guard back into place, Ivan gave Sergei a half-hearted punch and pushed him back a few feet. Arms raised, Sergei danced from foot to foot before jabbing Ivan in the jaw. My hand flew to my mouth to stifle my cry of terror. Recovering easily from the hit, Ivan landed a body punch that caused Sergei to double over and then slammed his gloved fist into the side of the other man's head. Despite the protective head gear, Sergei tottered on his feet and ended up against the fence for support.

Ivan stood back and waited patiently for Sergei to shake off the dizziness. They smacked gloves and started to spar again. The longer I watched Ivan fight, the harder I started to breathe—but it wasn't because I was afraid for him.

Gulping, I licked my lips and glanced around nervously. No one seemed to have noticed that my nipples had puckered to tight peaks that pressed against the sheer, lacy cups of my bra. I prayed the busy black and white ikat print of my dress would provide enough camouflage to hide my aroused state.

What is wrong with me?

I couldn't understand why the sight of Ivan pounding on Sergei was making me so hot. Surely this wasn't normal. What kind of a girlfriend got turned on by something so brutal and violent?

Apparently this kind, I silently acknowledged while desperately trying to ignore the aching throb between my thighs. I'd never denied that one of the things I found so attractive about Ivan was his primal, tough guy side. After he had saved me from armed gang members with his bare freaking hands, I had never once doubted he would protect me. There was something incredibly alluring about being loved by a man who would do anything to keep me safe.

But this? Actually seeing him fight? Holy. Freaking. Hell. I wanted to run my greedy hands all over that ripped, sweaty chest of his and drop to my knees to worship that big cock I had come to love so much. I wanted to feel his powerful body thrusting into me and those brutally strong hands running over my naked skin with the gentle intensity I had learned to expect from him.

When Ivan took a water break, his gaze zeroed in on me. He seemed to always sense my presence and this time was no different. His eyes narrowed and his jaw tensed. I tightly clutched the straps of my backpack and wondered what he was thinking. Did he know that I was practically panting for him?

He hooked his thumb toward his office, silently commanding me to go there and wait for him. I couldn't read the expression on his face. His many years in the Russian mafia had given him a skill I could never hope of mastering. He could so easily hide what he was feeling, slipping into an emotionless mask that perplexed and frustrated me. I'm sure it came in useful when he was doing the awful things he had done back then but now? It irked me to no end.

Averting my gaze from the cage, I made my way across the gym and into his office. I shut the door but didn't close the blinds because I wanted to watch him. Dropping my bag on the chair in front of his desk, I moved around to his comfy, swiveling leather seat and logged into the accounting software. The gym's manager was

out on medical leave so I had stepped in to cover for him. It gave me a chance to use my accounting skills and helped me feel like I was paying Ivan back for all the generosity he had shown me.

Not that he had ever made me feel as if he begrudged a single penny! In the early days of our relationship, I had been uneasy about the beautiful things he gave me and his insistence on supporting me so I could earn my master's degree. I had quickly learned that Ivan truly expected nothing in return for his help. He didn't hold it over my head or use it as a weapon when we argued. He had made it plainly clear that he did those things for me because he loved me. It was as simple as that for him.

Though he never missed a chance to tell me how much he loved me, Ivan seemed to find great pleasure in spoiling me. I made a point of assuring him that I enjoyed and appreciated the little things he did for me, like packing picnics and leaving sweet notes tucked into my purse or textbooks, just as much as the ostentatious things. Not one to nag, I accepted that Ivan was a grown man fully capable of deciding how best to spend his money and left it at that.

Unable to concentrate on the payroll figures in front of me, I kept sneaking glances through the window. Ivan and Sergei continued to spar while Paco, one of his most trusted trainers, shouted instructions. I understood now why these men—the legit fighters and the underground guys like Sergei—paid so much money and went through such hell suffering through Ivan's training regimens.

Even retired, he was an absolute beast in that ring. The longer I watched him fight, the more excited I became. Squeezing my knees together, I reached for the water bottle on his desk, twisted off the cap and took a long drink. The cool fluid rushing down my throat didn't help ease the scorching lust arcing through me one bit.

When Ivan climbed out of the cage, he looked toward the office and our gazes clashed. He only glanced away from me once as Paco cut the tape from his hands. Briefly, he disappeared into the locker room and emerged a few minutes later in different shorts and with bare feet. Wiping his face and neck with a clean towel, he strode toward his office with determined steps.

With the heat of an excited blush staining my cheeks, I tried to look busy. My core fluttered with a swarm of butterflies as I counted down the seconds until he came through the door. Swallowing hard when the hinges squealed, I didn't look up immediately and pretended I was concentrating on a column of numbers on the computer screen.

"Erin?" He spoke my name with a tense tone I hadn't been expecting.

Peering up at him, I kept my gaze focused on his handsome face and not the slick, tattooed muscles that tempted me so much. I tried again to read his face but couldn't do it. There was a tightness around his mouth and a hardness to his eyes that surprised me. "Yes?"

He shut the door but didn't come closer to the desk. Gripping the towel in his brawny hands, he stared at me. "I didn't know you were coming today."

"Payroll has to be processed by Tuesday. I didn't want to put it off until Monday afternoon."

"Oh." He must have caught me ogling his chest because he dabbed at his inked skin with the towel, dragging the crisp white fibers over the onion domes and crosses and other symbols marking him forever with his criminal past.

"I didn't know you still sparred like that."

"I don't. I only got in the ring today because Sergei's partner is sick and Alexei couldn't get out of a meeting." He hesitated and twisted the towel with his thick, scarred fingers. "Listen, *angel moy*, what you saw me doing in the ring, I'm not that man anymore. You have to understand that it's just practice, and you will *never* see that side of me outside of this gym."

I finally understood why he seemed so tense. My heart ached as he showed that vulnerable side of himself to me and only me. "I know you would never hurt me. I'm not afraid of you."

"You've never had a reason to be truly afraid of me. You've never seen me like that." He gestured out toward the cage. "I'm a violent man, Erin. Never forget that."

"You *were* a lot of things, but you're not those things anymore. I know who you are *now* and that's all I care about, Ivan." Hoping to put his mind at ease, I decided to be honest with him. "Watching you fight didn't scare me. Actually, it...um...excited me."

Surprise filtered across his face. "What?"

I gulped anxiously. "It made me really hot."

His mouth slanted in that boyish, lopsided way that always made my heart race. "Is that so?"

"Yes."

He studied me for a moment before pivoting and marching to the window. Watching him close the blind, I gripped the edge of the desk and waited to see what he would do next. When he locked the door, I breathed a bit faster and shallower. The wildest wobbling sensation shook my core. Certain one of us needed to be responsible, I found the courage to speak. "Ivan, *here*?"

"Yes."

"But...*now*? With a gym packed with people?"

"Yes."

"But they'll hear us."

"That's very likely." With a mischievous glint in his eyes, Ivan stalked toward me and lifted me right out of the chair. He spun me around and plopped me down onto the desk. Cupping the back of my head, he crashed our mouths together, claiming my lips with a kiss so fervently passionate that it left me dizzy. I whimpered and clutched at his strong arms, feeling the powerful muscle flex beneath my fingertips. The crazy amount of body heat radiating from his incredible body stunned me. I ran my hands over his slick, blazing skin and wished I was naked.

As if reading my mind, Ivan peeled off my cardigan and tugged at my dress. "Where's the zipper?"

Peppering his neck with kisses, I said, "The back, but take off the belt first."

He whipped free the belt and tossed it behind him. Reaching back, he found the zipper and tugged it down. Planting my palms against the desk, I lifted my bottom just long enough for him to whisk the dress up and over my head. It landed on the chair and was quickly joined by my bra.

Grasping the front of my tights and undies, Ivan jerked them down my hips and thighs. He took the time to unzip and tug free my black leather heeled booties. I was thrilled by the way he roughly undressed me, yanking and tugging to get to my naked skin in a haste.

Wrapping my legs around his waist, I clasped his shoulders and pulled him toward me. The kiss of his naked skin to mine made me moan. He slid those rough

fingers of his into my hair, grasping the strands in his fist, and stabbed his tongue against mine. When he kissed me like this, there was nothing to do but hold on for the wild ride he promised. Though he was always a tender and considerate lover, Ivan possessed this feral, dominant side that he sometimes couldn't hold back.

Like today.

"Oh!" I gasped as his mouth settled over my nipple. He sucked hard and flicked his tongue over the red peak before suckling me again. I clawed at his back, both wanting him to stop and wanting him *not* to stop. The tight, prickly sensation of his mouth clamped on my breast traveled right down to my throbbing clitoris—and he absolutely knew it.

"You're so wet I can smell you, *angel moy*."

Sometimes he said the dirtiest things, things that made my pussy ache and my heart flutter at the same time. As if to prove that he was right, he slid his fingers along the seam of my slit and gently probed me. He penetrated me easily, his thick digits spearing me deeply and making me moan. "Ivan!"

"You want more than my fingers?" He worked them in and out of me at a pace so slow it tormented me. "Maybe you want my tongue here?" He swirled his fingertips around the swollen bud of my clit before dipping them back inside my soaking channel. "Or maybe you want my cock here?"

I wanted it all but I had to choose. Sliding my hand into his loose shorts, I grasped that massive cock of his. He pressed forward, angling his hips so that his erection glided against my palm. "I want this inside me."

He tangled his tongue with mine. "Do it, Erin. Show me where you want my cum."

Burning up with passion and need, I didn't have to be told twice. I pushed his shorts down and freed his huge shaft. I pulled him toward me and dragged the blunt crown of him through my pink folds. Loving the way it felt when the head of his cock brushed my clit, I did it again and again until even Ivan was groaning.

Lining him up with my entrance, I pushed him just inside my pussy before looping my arms around his neck and gazing into those icy blue eyes that had ensnared me all those months ago. "Make me come, Ivan."

Growling like a damn bear, he thrust into me and plundered my mouth with that wicked, wicked tongue. There was nothing gentle or easy about this coupling. Tonight, in the comfort of our bedroom, I was certain Ivan would love me in that slow, sensual way that left me teary-eyed and shuddering. Right now, he was showing me that primal male side of him, the one that made my knees weak and my toes curl.

He thrust into me with such force that the desk shook beneath us. Even with the loud music and the general noise level of the gym, I had no doubt that the fighters on the equipment closest to Ivan's office could hear us. It should have embarrassed me—and maybe it would when the flush of lust finally faded—but it didn't. All I could think about was how much I loved this man and how damn good he made me feel.

When Ivan grabbed my hand and pushed it down between our bodies, I knew what he wanted me to do. I flicked my fingertips around my clit in that rhythm that I liked best, rubbing and rubbing that pink pearl until my pussy clenched around his fat cock. My thighs tightened around his waist, and my nipples throbbed incessantly as I climbed higher and higher.

Just before I leapt over the edge into that canyon of ecstasy, we locked gazes. Beneath the lust and need darkening his eyes, I saw the same deep, passionate love reflected back at me. The reminder of it pushed me right over the edge. I buried my face against his neck and whispered his name again and again as the blissful explosions shuddered through me.

Grasping my bottom in his big, manly hands, Ivan lifted me right up off the table. I clenched my legs around him and captured his mouth, showing him how much I loved him with our never-ending kiss. He thrust up into me twice more before slamming so deep that I gasped against his lips. I could feel his cock swelling and the spreading heat that filled me as he shook in my arms.

Ever so gently, he lowered me to the desk but he didn't pull away from me just yet. Holding me close, Ivan made love to my mouth in that languorous, lovely way and whispered sweet things to me. I didn't think I would ever tire of hearing him call me his angel. When he said it, I believed it.

Running his thumb across my pout, Ivan smiled down at me. "Maybe I should hire you on here full-time."

"You wouldn't get any work done."

"This place practically runs itself."

I pinched his arm. "Liar."

"Well," he conceded, "I suppose they do need me near the sparring cages."

I caressed his chest and biceps. "They need you for a hell of a lot more than that."

He tipped my chin and held my gaze. "And you, *angel moy?*"

Peering into his eyes, I told him the truth, even though it scared me to be so entwined with him. "I need you like I need air."

His eyes flashed with happiness and love—and possession. "Every day I wake up hoping that I can show you what you mean to me—that you're as essential to me as air and sunshine and food and water. I go to bed every night knowing that I didn't even come close."

Cupping his face between my hands, I forced him to look at me. "You do show me. Every day," I added and kissed him with all the love I could muster. "I can't believe how lucky I am to have you, Ivan. Out of every woman in the world, you chose me."

He blinked rapidly, and I thought I saw the slight sheen of tears. Just as quickly as the glimmer appeared, it vanished. He pressed his lips to the top of my head. "Sometimes I wonder how the fates conspired to throw us together that afternoon when you came to me for help."

I rested my cheek to his chest. Thinking of all the love we shared and the friends who would soon be sitting around our table to share thanks for all the good that we had in our lives, I smiled. "Maybe we're just really lucky people..."