

LION'S FIRST ROAR

Her Russian Protector

Roxie Rivera

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Dear Reader,

*This short story belongs to the Her Russian
Protector Series. It follows the events of
NIKOLAI 2 (Her Russian Protector #6.)*

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1 ONE

Nikolai relished the calm, quiet stillness of the house in the early morning. Alone in the kitchen, he prepared and ate his simple breakfast and enjoyed a pot of freshly brewed tea, just the way he liked it. When he was finished with his meal, he put together a breakfast tray for Vivian. Toast with a smear of almond butter, fruit, a small glass of apple juice and a tiny pot of carefully made hot chocolate—he made sure it was perfect for her.

Last night, after bringing her home from the gallery and making love to her again and again, she had been up and down four or five times. He had quickly learned

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that asking her how he could help only aggravated and frustrated her more. So he had stayed quiet and used touch, a gentle caress of her back or a loving squeeze of her hand, to let her know that he cared and that he was awake if she needed him.

The back door opened and closed. The squeak of wet soles and the tapping steps of Stasi's paws against the hardwood echoed loudly. Boychenko had taken the dog out to play as soon as he had arrived for his guard shift. It was a routine the two shared, and one he actively encouraged.

But as Nikolai glanced up from the grapefruit he was carefully sectioning, he waved the sharp knife in Boychenko's direction. "If his paws are muddy, wipe them off. I don't want to find Vee on her hands and knees cleaning up dirt again."

"Sorry, boss." Boychenko winced, undoubtedly reliving the memory of Nikolai losing his fucking shit upon discovering his pregnant wife crawling around in the entryway with a microfiber cloth in each hand. "I won't let that happen again."

The kid wouldn't. One warning was all he ever needed. As if to prove his point, Boychenko grabbed a handful of paper towels and managed to get the massive Great Dane to cooperate. When Boychenko was finished, Stasi sauntered over to the oversized island and

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nosed around in search of food. Nikolai clicked his teeth. "Nyet."

The dog grumbled and snorted dramatically before leaving the kitchen. He would slowly make the round of the house, nosing up against each guard until one of them fed him a treat.

"Vivian didn't sleep well last night." Nikolai cut out the last few sections of the grapefruit and dropped them into the small bowl. "I've already spoken to Ten about keeping the house quiet so she can get some rest this morning. I don't want her doing anything strenuous today." Gathering up the rind, he carried it to the compost bin and tossed them into the container under the sink. "And she needs to stay close to the house."

He didn't have to say why. Everyone in the family knew what today was.

"I'll do my best." Boychenko handed him a clean dish towel from the drawer.

"See that you do." Nikolai picked up the tray and left the kitchen. When he reached the master suite upstairs, he gently pushed open the door with his elbow and slipped inside the room. The palest gray light washed over the bed and sitting area. *I should close the drapes so the sun doesn't wake her.*

"Kolya?"

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He froze mid-step and turned toward the bed. Rolled on her left side, she lifted her head from his pillow and blinked sleepily. “What time is it?”

“It’s early.” He placed the tray on the ottoman in front of her favorite chair and walked back to the bed. Easing onto the mattress, he reached out to push soft strands of hair behind her ear. There were still faint red lines on her face from the wrinkles of his pillowcase. “You should go back to sleep.”

“I don’t think I can.” She made a face and rolled her shoulders. “My back is killing me.”

“Show me.” She took his hand and dragged it to her lower back. He pressed on the spot she had indicated. “Here?”

“Yes.”

Certain that asking her to move or rollover would invoke the angry version of his normally sweet little wife, he decided that it was hell of a lot smarter to just climb into bed behind her. There was a time when he would have protested the very thought of wrinkling his shirt before leaving the house, but those days were long gone. Vivian had changed him in small ways he had never expected.

And he loved her all the more for it.

“I made hot chocolate for you.” He squeezed into position behind her and adjusted the pillows so they

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could both be comfortable while he massaged her lower back. "It's Benny's recipe."

She glanced back at him and smiled. "You spoil me."

"You make it so easy for me." He kissed her cheek before nuzzling her throat. She had chipped away so much of his emotional armor that he only hesitated a moment before admitting, "I worked hard for this life, and I built all of this," he gestured around them, "so I would be able to give my wife and children whatever they wanted."

She touched his jaw, her fingertips gliding feather-light across his skin. "You're all I want and need."

From anyone else, the statement would have drawn a scoff from him. But she meant it. Every word. She really did only want him. Rich, poor, mobbed up or free—she loved him. All of him. Just as he was.

"But I really do love the way you spoil me with pretty things."

He laughed softly and continued kneading her lower back until he felt the tension leave her shoulders. In the back of his mind, he knew that he needed to get on the road if he was going to make the meeting on time, but he suddenly didn't give a fuck whether or not Luka Beciraj had to wait. From the first whisper of a possibility of this meeting, Nikolai had registered his distaste. He had made it clear that his wife was ready to go into labor any day with his first born child, with his son, and

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that he needed to be close to her so he could protect and shield her when she was at her most vulnerable.

Vivian expelled a relieved sigh as he pressed hard against the curve of her spine. He matched the movement of his hand with tender kisses peppered up and down her neck and jaw. "That feels so good."

The breathy sound of her voice made him crazy. Only ten hours ago, he'd been buried deep inside her, reclined right here on these pillows while she went wild on top of him. Just remembering the way she'd clawed at his chest and cried out his name again and again sent a hot streak of need through his stomach. It was hard to believe that only a year ago, she had been a shy, uncertain virginal bride. Now she was a wicked little sex kitten who drove him to distraction.

When he let his hand wander along the curve of her hip to her upper thigh, she giggled softly and grasped his wrist. "We can't."

"We can." He dragged her hand right along with his as he slipped his fingers under her nightgown and discovered the silky smoothness of bare skin.

"Kolya..."

"Hush," he whispered gently. "I know how to help you relax."

"You know how to make me do whatever you want."

"That too."

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With a careful tug, he pulled Vee onto her back and pushed her thighs apart. She didn't even protest when he dropped sensual kisses along the swell of each of breast. He bit the front of her nightgown and tugged it down to reveal even more of her luscious body. She sucked in a sharp breath when he flicked his tongue against her nipple. Knowing how sensitive she was, he was careful not to be too rough with her.

His hand between her thighs, he cupped her feminine heat and slowly rotated his wrist, rubbing the flat of his palm against her clitoris. It wasn't enough pressure to get her there, but it was enough to make her squirm and whimper for more. When she tried to kiss him, he pulled back and grinned, making her work for it. She threaded her fingers through his hair and gripped a handful, tugging him down for the kiss she so badly wanted.

The moment their tongues touched, he switched tactics and explored her slick pussy with his fingers. He circled her clit with lazy strokes, working that tiny pearl until it was swollen and stiff. When she started to clutch at his shoulders and rock her hips, he slipped a pair of fingers inside her and rubbed her clitoris with his thumb. He bit down on her lower lip, just enough to make her gasp, and then kissed the slope of her jaw to the sensitive spot on her neck that he loved to torment.

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He sucked hard and scraped his teeth over her skin, giving her a love bite that would throb bright red for the rest of the morning.

It was the bite that sent her right over the edge. She scratched at his shoulder and buried her face against his throat as she came. Her little pants and the moan of ecstasy that escaped her mouth left him grinning wickedly. He loved driving her wild like this, loved making her come with the practiced skill of a man who knew all the secret's to his woman's body. She was his, only his, and he wanted her to always remember that he was the only one who could make her feel like this.

As she came down from her orgasmic high, he stroked her lush curves and kissed her tenderly. Her cheeks were flushed, and she had that sweet, relaxed smile that told him he'd done a good job. Brushing his thumb along her chin, he whispered, "*Ya tebya lyublyu.*"

She kissed his cheek. "I love you, too."

When her small hands drifted toward his belt buckle, he gently stopped her. She glanced up at him with confusion. "But you—?"

"I'm fine." He pressed his lips to her forehead. He was actually anything but fine. His cock ached and throbbed, but he knew what would happen if he made love to his wife the way he wanted. He would be melted out and relaxed and that simply wouldn't do. Not

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with everything that had to be hammered out during the meeting today. "I'm already running late."

Cupping his face, she forced him to meet her imploring gaze. "Promise me you'll be careful today."

He narrowed his eyes with suspicion. He had told her he was going out of town for business but he hadn't given her any reason to worry. "You've been eavesdropping again."

"No." She quickly dropped her gaze. "Yes," she admitted quietly. "I heard you and Kostya talking in the kitchen last night."

"Vee..."

Lifting her gaze, she stared up at him, her expression one of pure anxiety. "Are you really going to sit down with Luka and my father and Hector Salas?"

"Vee." He spoke her name with more force, shutting her down before she managed to ask too many questions. "You know my position on this issue."

She pouted like a young child. "What happened to no secrets?"

"You're pregnant," he pointed out the obvious. "You don't need the stress of worrying about these things. And I *did* tell you that I was going to meet with your father today."

"But you didn't say anything about Luka Beciraj!"

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“Because I didn’t want you to worry like this.” He frowned down at her. “I knew you would get yourself worked up into a panic.”

“It’s so dangerous, Nikolai. Meeting with Luka and Hector and my dad? He’s still a wanted fugitive! Luka won’t be able to fly into this country without being flagged, and you know the DEA probably has their spies and snitches all over Hector’s business.”

Like an arrow, sadness pierced his heart. Hearing Vivian talk about the underworld in a way that made it clear she understood the angles and players upset him deeply. This wasn’t the life he had wanted for her. He remembered a time, before she had ever come to work at Samovar, when he had worked out an entire plan for her. He had mapped out the bright future she would have and all the ways he would help her achieve her full potential.

She was supposed to become a wildly successful artist who married a good man. She was supposed to have left behind the world of crime and danger when her father went to prison and she moved in with her grandparents.

She *had* become a wildly successful artist. She *had* a college degree. She had friends who loved her and was well-respected within their community.

But instead she had chosen him. She hadn’t chosen a good man to be her husband and life partner. *She*

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picked me. She had agreed to walk next to him through this life and to build a family with him, even if it meant that they would always have one foot in the shadowy underworld that had very nearly claimed her young life.

Tell her the truth. She deserves it.

With a sigh, he explained the situation. "Luka came in legally through New York. He brought his cousin with him. They look so similar they could be brothers. His cousin stayed in New York and is pretending to be him. Zec slipped Luka down here without anyone else realizing it."

Her eyes widened "Do they do that often? Luka and his cousin switching places, I mean?"

"During their family's war, it was a security measure. Now they do it only when it's necessary." He rubbed her earlobe between his fingers. "Hector knows how to handle himself. Your father is a master at this sort of thing. We're meeting in a cabin by the lake, just outside of Mathis. It's all been arranged by Kostya."

She studied his face for an intense moment and then nodded. "All right."

Putting his hand on her very pregnant belly, he nuzzled their noses together. "I wouldn't do anything to jeopardize my life, not now." He leaned down and kissed her stomach. "Not when I have everything to live for..."

Lifting his head, he implored her to understand. "What I'm doing today? I'm doing it for us. I'm doing

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it to make this city safer and to get our family out of the last of our most dangerous and risky business. We're moving on to bigger and better and *cleaner* earnings."

"I trust you, Kolya." She smiled at him and caressed his face. "I love you so much. Please be careful."

"Always." He kissed her one last time before finally untangling himself and sliding out of the bed. "Are you hungry?"

"Yes, please." She tried to sit up, but he had mercy on her and lifted her into position. After he fixed the pillows, he brought the tray to the bed and handed her the television remote. She popped a section of grapefruit into her mouth and switched on the morning news. "I'm going to call Kiki later to see if she has any advice on all this back pain."

He schooled his expression at the mention of the doula and Bradley coach they had hired a few months ago. When Vivian had decided she wanted to try for a natural childbirth, he had been supportive of her choice, but the fear that something would go wrong if she birthed at home or in a center kept him awake at night. She had compromised by choosing to use the city's best hospital if he would agree to hire a doula and attend childbirth classes.

He'd gone—for her—but he hadn't been very comfortable. Only one other partner had been brave enough to speak with him or even try to be friendly during the

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breaks. Kiki was a nice person, but she had a voice like a dentist's drill. He could handle her in small doses, but he wasn't looking forward to sharing a hospital room with her for hours and hours.

And there was something else. Something he was ashamed to admit, even to himself.

He was jealous of the way Vee listened to every word Kiki said and took her advice and opinion over his. It was a childish thing, really, but there it was. He was so used to having Vivian look to him for advice or support. To have her instantly seek out some other person? To shove him aside for someone she trusted more? It just drove him up the fucking wall.

But he kept his mouth shut. Firmly. Vivian needed Kiki's help to get the childbirth experience she wanted.

"Will you be home late?"

"I'll try to get back to you as soon as possible." He glanced at his watch. "It's a three hour drive to the meet-up. The talks will take an hour or two. Then it's three hours back. I need to pop into Samovar and head over to a couple of construction sites before I come home."

"Don't rush." She grasped his hand and interlaced their fingers. "I'm in good hands."

Not wanting her to worry again, he said, "I have some extra men on the house today." He cupped her jaw. "It's just a precaution."

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What he didn't say was that Besian had men watching the house and her own father had sent some of his most trusted guys as backup. She was the safest woman in this city.

After ducking into the bathroom to tidy up, Nikolai leaned down and captured her mouth in a slow, easy kiss. "I'll see you later."

"Bye."

He left the door to the bedroom cracked an inch or two before heading downstairs. Danny and Arty were waiting in the kitchen. He grabbed his suit jacket from the back of the chair he had draped it on earlier and slid his arms through the sleeves. "Let's go."

Flanked by his men, Nikolai left the house and climbed into the front passenger seat of Artyom's SUV. As the street captain he trusted most backed out of the private drive, Nikolai stared up at the master bedroom windows overlooking the garden. He could just make out the silhouette of a woman—*my woman*—behind the gauzy white drapes. Certain she was watching, he broke his usual cool, collected demeanor and lifted a hand to acknowledge that he saw her. The curtain moved just enough to show her beautiful face and a waving hand.

Behind the wheel, Artyom smirked. Nikolai caught his eye and shot him a *fuck you* glare. The captain just laughed it off. "You're getting soft, boss."

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Thinking of his wife waiting for him to return, he murmured, "Vivian is the softest person I know." He fastened his seatbelt. "She's also the strongest."

Artyom's mouth twitched with amusement. "When did you become such a romantic?"

Nikolai snorted and shifted to get comfortable for the long drive that awaited them. "Just drive."

"Yes, boss."

2 TWO

Stretching his aching neck, Nikolai stepped into the cold air of a January afternoon and strode across the deck. Secluded and private, the lakeside cabin had offered the four bosses exactly what they needed to get a deal struck on guns, narcotics and some side-businesses. It had been a long but productive two hours with very little friction. He usually found himself playing the role of diplomat in these conversations, but Hector, Luka and Romero had all come to the table ready to strengthen ties and expand their businesses while building better alliances.

Movement in the trees drew attention. He spotted Danny along the perimeter and then one of Hector's

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men about twenty yards away. They had the area locked down tight, but Nikolai didn't expect any trouble.

"It's beautiful out here." Luka emerged from the house and joined him at the rail. The young boss pulled a pack of smokes from a pocket and offered him one.

Nikolai shook his head. "I don't smoke."

Luka smiled knowingly before lighting up and taking that first long drag. "How is your wife?"

"She's very well." Nikolai watched him enjoy the cigarette without envy. The old cravings had finally settled down and rarely bothered him anymore.

"You must be excited about your son coming soon." He flicked ash over the edge of the railing before leaning his arms against it.

"Yes."

"That's good, you know? To have an heir so quickly? You're a lucky man." He expelled a lungful of smoke. "If your wife gives you another boy or two and then some girls, you can build a real dynasty. Family is everything. *Blood* is everything."

Nikola wasn't sure what to say to that. Luka had been raised in a big, cohesive family where honor and respect and blood ties were the only thing that mattered. On the contrary, he had grown up the hard way, alone and unloved for most of his childhood.

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Sometimes he worried he wouldn't know how to be a good father or how to be the family man that his wife and children would need—but then he calmed those fears by reminding himself that Vivian was his partner. She wouldn't let him step out of line. She would show him the way.

Thinking of the strange marriage contract that existed between Luka and the Dushku girl, he said, "You'll be starting your own family soon."

Luka made a humming sound. "We'll see."

"Are you going to see the girl while you're here?" As far as Nikolai knew, the girl, a college student in Houston, still hadn't been informed of the marriage pact struck by her family and Luka's. He could just imagine the fireworks that accompanied that discovery.

Luka shook his head. "No. I'll wait until May, when she graduates, and then I can bring her straight home with me."

Nikolai didn't think it was his place to tell another man how to woo a future wife, but he was pretty fucking sure Luka's arrogance and aloofness were going to get him in trouble. He was still trying to figure out a way to give the young boss a little guidance without offending him when Romero joined them.

His father-in-law dropped down onto an Adirondack chair and stretched out his legs. His leather motorcycle

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colors creaked with every movement. Rolling his ankle, he winced, and Nikolai wondered if age was finally catching up with the notorious enforcer. “How was my baby girl when you left her this morning?”

As if sensing that his presence would hinder the discussion between the two relatives, Luka quietly excused himself and wandered down to the lake with his cigarette to keep him company.

“She’s good. Tired,” Nikolai added, “but good.”

Romero stared out at the lake. “You’ll keep an eye on her after the baby comes?”

Nikolai knew exactly what Romero was asking even without saying the words. Vivian’s mother had suffered from terrible post-partum depression that had exacerbated her existing mental health issues. She had snapped one day and tried to drown Vivian in a bathtub. For all anyone knew, she had hurt or abused Vivian quite a few times prior to that horrific moment.

“I’ll keep a very close eye on her, but you don’t need to worry. Vivian has spoken to her doctor about the family history. We’ve educated ourselves on the signs.” He didn’t have to say that he would do anything to keep Vivian and the baby safe. Therapy, drugs, nannies, night nurses—he would move heaven and earth to make sure his wife had what she needed to be a good mother and to be happy and healthy. “We’re prepared.”

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Silence stretched between the two men. Eventually Romero found something to say.

“She was the most beautiful baby.” His gravelly voice didn’t match the wistful expression on his hard face. “Her eyes are a paler blue now, but when she was a baby, they were bluer than the ocean. I’d never seen anything like it.” He cleared his throat and kept his gaze fixed on the lake. “I couldn’t believe I had made something so perfect.”

Nikolai wasn’t sure what to say. He wasn’t close to his father-in-law. After all, the man had tried to kill him a decade earlier! To hear the infamous machete-wielding hard-man talking about his feelings on fatherhood was unsettling, to say the least.

Kostya saved him from the awkward conversation. Mouth tight and eyes narrowed with worry, the cleaner thrust a cell phone at him. “You need to take this.”

Not liking Kostya’s tone, he snatched the phone. “Hello?”

“Kolya?”

Hearing the strain in Vivian’s voice, he asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Um...” She blew out a noisy breath. “Are you busy?”

“No. We’re done. I was just about to leave. Why?”

“Don’t panic.”

He fucking panicked. “What’s wrong?”

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"I'm in labor."

"What?" His exclamation brought Romero to his feet. "You're sure?"

"Kiki is here. It's labor."

Fuck. "How long have you been having contractions?"

"Um...."

"Vee!"

"So, they sort of started right after you left. They weren't regular at first, but they were painful. Now they're regular and painful."

His stomach lurched. *Five hours. Five fucking hours!* He wanted to shout a hundred different questions at her but he tried to remain calm. "How close are they?"

"Oh, they're about twenty minutes apart. Kiki says I have plenty of time to get to the hospital."

Kiki says. Kiki says. He had something he wanted to say to Kiki.

"I'm on my way home. Don't wait for me if you need to go to the hospital. Ten, Ilya and Boychenko know what to do."

"I know." She sounded strangely calm now. "Take your time. Don't rush. This could take hours and hours."

Hours? He didn't want to think about her being in pain for even one hour. "*Ya tebya lyublyu.*"

"I love you, too, Kolya."

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He ended the call and tossed the phone at Kostya. "We're leaving. *Now.*"

"Is it time?" Romero seemed almost anxious.

"Yes." He hesitated. "Are you coming to Houston?"

Romero shook his head. "Not tonight. They'll be expecting me. I'll find a way to see my daughter and my grandson. Soon." His father-in-law gestured to the house. "Go. I'll let the others know you had to leave."

He ran through the cabin, hot on Kostya's heels, and slipped into the passenger seat of the cleaner's car. The drive back to Houston should have taken three hours and twenty minutes, but Kostya punched the gas and expertly manned the wheel. Nikolai kept in touch with Vivian with frequent calls and texts. The two hour drive was almost too much for him to handle. He kept running through the checklists and the lessons they'd learned in their childbirth classes. Eaten up with worry, he had to give the what-ifs and all the ways labor could go wrong a mental kick to clear his headspace.

"She'll be fine." Kostya had remained quiet until they hit the Houston city limits. "Women have been having babies since the beginning of time. Her body knows what to do." He quickly changed lanes and hit the gas again. "And if her body has problems, some of the world's best doctors are right here in this town."

Kostya's encouraging words didn't have the calming effect he had probably imagined. Instead, Nikolai

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thought of shoulder dystocia and C-sections and prolapsed umbilical cords. By the time they finally pulled up in front of the house, he was a fucking wreck inside. He was out of the passenger seat before the car had even stopped.

“Vee?” He burst into the house through the front door and found Boychenko sitting on the stairs, his head resting in his hands. The look of relief on the kid’s face was easily spotted. “Where is she?”

“In the bedroom with her doula,” Boychenko said, standing and stepping aside. “The SUV is ready to go. I’ve got your bags in the back seat.”

Nikolai nodded at the kid and raced upstairs. Ten leaned against the wall outside the master suite. Arms crossed, he looked tense and upset. Shoving off the wall, Ten swore loudly in Russian. “Were you pushing the car?”

Nikolai cast a warning glare in the enforcer’s direction. “Not now.”

“I think it’s starting to get serious,” Ten remarked. “She was walking around the house and climbing up and down the stairs but she went into the bedroom about forty minutes ago.” He checked his watch. “She and Kiki haven’t come out since, but Vivian is making a lot of noise.”

Stepping inside the bedroom, he found Vivian walking from one end of the bedroom to the other while Kiki

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encouraged her to keep moving and to relax and blow through the next contraction. As soon as she spotted him, Vivian smiled. He rushed to her side, eating up the floor with long strides and engulfed her in a loving embrace. She buried her face against his neck. "I'm so glad you're here."

"I'm sorry it took so long."

"It's okay. My contractions are twelve minutes apart. This is going slowly. I didn't even—*unnh*hh." She gripped his arms so tightly he actually flinched.

Realizing she was tensing up, he grasped the back of her neck in one hand and kneaded gently. He placed his other hand on her rock hard belly. The training they had attended kicked in suddenly. "You have to relax, Vivian. Every time you tighten up and fight the contraction, it will hurt more."

As if calmed by his very presence, she blew out a slow, noisy breath. He could feel her muscles easing. She sagged against him, holding onto his waist and rocked side to side. Pressing his cheek to hers, he closed his eyes and held her, giving her the support she needed, until the contraction ended.

When he opened his eyes, he discovered Kiki still seated on the chair but she smiled warmly at him. After all those weeks of not liking her, he felt strangely happy to have her approval. *I'm not going to fuck this up. I can do this. I can help Vee get through this.*

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Pointing to the bathroom, Kiki mouthed one word at him, “Shower.”

Remembering the discussions about water and showers helping during the first phase of labor, he quietly led Vivian into the bathroom and shut the door. He turned on the shower, not too hot, and jerked at his tie. Not caring where his clothes landed, he dropped them haphazardly behind him and then helped Vivian out of her yoga pants and tank top.

They hadn’t been under the warm spray of the rain-style heads very long before she whimpered with pain again. Leaning back against him, she swayed side to side. He wrapped his arms around her naked body, supporting her belly, and kissed her neck. “Breathe, *solnyshka*. You can do this. One contraction at a time.”

Alone with Vivian in the steamy confines of their bathroom, he realized that all the dread he had been experiencing and all of his fears about what could go wrong weren’t going to help her. He had to let go of all that and be the strong, fearless man she needed. *This isn’t about you. It’s about her.*

Whispering encouragement and keeping his hands on her so she would remember that she wasn’t alone, he talked her through the pains gripping her body. One contraction, two contractions, three contractions—they stayed in the shower for five of them before she wanted to rest her legs.

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Not caring who saw the tattoos he normally kept covered, he wrapped a towel around his waist and covered her in the fluffy bathrobe she kept behind the door. He didn't bother Vivian with questions about what she wanted to wear. He grabbed a camisole and cotton undies from her side of the walk-in closet and helped her into them.

Out in the bedroom, Kiki had brought out a large birthing ball. Vivian gladly dropped onto it and leaned forward against the mattress. The doula massaged Vivian's lower back while he hastily dressed. He came out of the bathroom to the sounds of his wife gripped by another contraction. Glancing at his watch, he calculated the time between them. At this rate, she was going to be in labor for hours!

Wordlessly, Kiki encouraged him to take her place and then quietly left the bedroom. He placed his chin on Vivian's shoulder and kneaded her lower back. "What else can I do to help you?"

"Just don't leave me," she said, her voice unnaturally tight and fast. "I need to be able to see you."

"*Zolota.*" He kissed her temple. "I'm here. I'm not leaving your sight again."

Vivian rested her forehead on her crossed arms and rocked back and forth on the ball. Her voice was muffled as she asked, "How was my dad?"

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He didn't think this was the time to talk about her father, but if it kept her mind off the pain and discomfort, he would tell her anything she wanted to know. "He was good. He told me that he's going to come see you and the baby soon."

"And your business?"

He started to tell her not to worry about any of that, but he knew her too well. She would dwell on it if he didn't reassure her. "Everything worked out exactly the way I wanted."

"Good." Relief filled her voice. "I'm glad."

The next two hours passed the same as the first. She rocked on the ball. She walked. She leaned against him and swayed. He managed to get her to drink and even eat a banana that Kiki had grabbed from downstairs. The doula continued to surprise him by staying out of their way and only offering support or advice when it was needed. He silently—and grudgingly—agreed that Vivian had been right about hiring a birthing specialist.

The contractions grew stronger and closer together until—finally—it was time to leave for the hospital. By now, Ten was pacing the hallway. Boychenko looked like he might pass out when Vivian had to stop halfway down the stairs to growl her way through a particularly painful contraction.

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“I’m driving.” Ten swiped the keys to the SUV from their peg. “You.” He pointed at Kiki. “Sit up front with me.”

The doula didn’t seem to know what to make of the giant enforcer. She simply nodded and trailed after him with her bags of supplies. Boychenko stayed behind to watch the house, but Ilya and some of Artyom’s crew were waiting outside to ride escort, just in case. Nikolai didn’t think anyone was stupid enough to make a move tonight, but he never took anything for granted, not where Vee was concerned.

If anyone did have the balls to try something, they wouldn’t have those balls for much longer. He wouldn’t call Kostya in for that job either. It would be one he would do himself—and relish.

Once they were on the road, Vivian’s contractions seemed to grow more intense, but she became focused and unnervingly quiet. If it wasn’t for her hand gripping his so tightly his fingertips went numb, he wouldn’t have even known she was in pain. Ten nervously eyed the backseat in the mirror’s reflection. Kiki twisted and angled her upper body so she could offer help. Nikolai tuned out everyone except for Vivian. He held her gaze as she breathed through her longest and strongest contraction yet.

When they reached the hospital, Ten stayed behind to deal with parking. With their hospital bag slung over

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his shoulder, Nikolai helped Vivian out of the vehicle with Kiki's help. They made their way inside and were quickly taken up to the labor and delivery floor.

The chaos he had expected never happened. An obstetrician from Vivian's practice was on the floor and came to greet her while the nurse and midwife on shift took her vital signs and made sure they had her medical history correct. When they asked her if she wanted to stay in her camisole and remove everything from the waist down or use one of the hospital gowns, she opted for the gown.

"Help me?" She didn't seem to be able to speak in long sentences anymore. It was as if her brain had decided to shut down certain functions so her body's sole focus could be on birthing their child.

"Come on," he said gently. Sliding his arm around her shoulders, he guided her into the bathroom and out of her clothing. He had turned around to fold her camisole and skirt when he heard her gasp. Spinning around, he found Vivian cradling her belly and staring at the floor where an increasingly large puddle started to form.

Her eyes were wide open, and she looked completely shocked. "I think my water just broke."

"Let's get you cleaned up." He peeled the wet gown from her body and helped her into the shower. "I'll get you a new one."

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When he opened the bathroom door, the midwife and nurses shifted him out of the way and efficiently tackled the situation. Once they were assured Vivian was perfectly fine and the amniotic fluid was clear, she was allowed to shower and finish changing. He helped her into the bed and stood back while an IV was placed in her hand—just in case—and a monitoring band was wrapped around her belly.

The sound of his son's strong heartbeat filled the room. The thrill of anticipation rocked him right to the core. Before this night was over, he would be holding his son in his arms. *I'm going to be a father.*

"Eight centimeters," the midwife announced after checking Vivian's progress. She patted his wife's knee and grinned encouragingly. "Not long now, sweetheart."

Vivian glanced up at him and managed a weak smile. A grimace quickly replaced it. They soon realized she couldn't handle the pain while in bed. A wireless monitoring device was attached to her belly, and they began the same routine they had been working through at the house—walking, rocking, squatting. With Kiki's guidance and his own intuition, he helped Vivian as best he could.

"Please stop checking your watch!" Vivian snapped after a particularly long and intense contraction.

Taken aback by the gruff command, he simply nodded and removed his watch, sticking it in his pocket and

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forgetting about the damned thing. He hadn't realized he was checking it so often. "I didn't mean to make you feel rushed, Vee."

"I know." She pressed her forehead to his chest and leaned into him. "I'm sorry."

"No. Don't apologize. We're fine." He wrapped his arms around her and massaged her back. "We're fine."

"I think I'm going to be sick." Vivian jerked away from him suddenly and frantically glanced around the room.

"Here." Kiki appeared with a basin and a washcloth just as his wife succumbed to the nausea. While Vivian retched, Kiki whispered, "Transition."

Now the pain seemed to be at its worst. Vivian squatted along the edge of the bed, gripping onto the mattress, and panted through the contractions wracking her small body with such torment. She wasn't making any noise other than those measured breaths. He couldn't even imagine the agony gripping her now. Guilt ate at him. *I did this to her.*

He had to bite his tongue when he thought about how much relief an epidural would give her. She could be pain-free and resting in bed instead of trying to find new ways to embrace the pain as her body worked to force their child from her womb. Remembering the hell

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of recovering from stab wounds and gunshots, he wondered how many times over labor pains were magnified. Ten? Twenty?

And this wasn't even the worst part of labor. Soon, she would be in sheer hell. His legs started to buckle as a wave of nausea hit him while he imagined the incredible pain that would accompany the baby's descent and exit.

Take the drugs, Vee. Just take the fucking drugs! He wanted to shout for her to change her mind, to let a doctor come in before it was too late.

But he didn't say that.

Crouched down next to his wife, Kiki glanced up at him as if to silently prod him to do something. Taking a clean washcloth from the stack next to the sink in the labor and delivery suite, he soaked it in cold water, wrung it out and returned to her side. Assuming the same crouched position, he wiped her forehead and tenderly kissed her temple.

Speaking in Russian, just for her, he whispered, "You're doing so well. You fucking amaze me, Vivian." He claimed her mouth now. "*Solnyshka*." He kissed her again. "We're almost there. I'm so proud of you."

No longer focused on the wall across the room, she held his gaze and nodded. He shifted until he was directly behind her and sitting on that spongy birthing ball. With his arms under hers, he held her up and gave

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her the support she needed to squat without tiring her legs. The contractions were right on top of each other now, and Vivian seemed to be vocalizing her pain much more.

Every now and then, he noticed the strange looks from the hospital staff. He didn't blame them for being agog. Men like him weren't known for being gentle or patient. With his sleeves rolled up to his elbows and his mob tattoos on full display, he looked more like a prison inmate than a loving partner gently guiding his wife through her first childbirth.

When the midwife knelt down to check her after Vivian had a series of difficult contractions, she seemed surprised. "Oh! You're plus two!"

What the hell does that mean?

"Okay, kiddo," the midwife said, "if you want to give birth here, that's fine. But if you think you want to be up in bed it's time to move." She patted Vivian's knee again. "Because this baby is on his way."

On his way? Now?

"Bed," Vivian grunted. "My legs hurt so badly right now."

He didn't even wait for the midwife to stand. In the next heartbeat, he was on his feet and scooping Vivian up into his arms. He carefully placed her on the bed and stroked her hair while the staff flew into a whirlwind of activity. Kiki moved to the other side of the bed and

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talked quietly with the midwife about the birth plan and the things Vivian wanted to try to avoid.

Turning her face, Vivian gripped the front of his shirt. “Oh my God, Nikolai.” He could hear the fear in her voice now. A tear dripped from the corner of her left eye. “This hurts so much. I literally can’t—*unnnhhhh*.” She squeezed her eyes shut and whimpered pitifully. “*Blyad!*”

Hearing her curse like that drove home just how intense the pain had grown. Guilt hacked away at him but he ignored his own issues and focused on her. “*Solnyshka*, you can do this. You’re right here. You’re so close.”

“Oh, God, Nikolai,” she said, almost panicked. “I know I said I wanted, like, five babies with you, but maybe one is enough?”

“*Sladest*.” He brushed damp hair behind her ear and trailed his thumb over her lower lip. “One is a perfect number.”

“Good.” She blinked dazedly and then grimaced. Pushing up on her palms, she let loose a wild growl that stunned him. “Oh, God. I think it’s time!”

The midwife was at the foot of the bed in an instant to check Vivian. “Oh, sweetheart, it’s definitely time.” She instructed one of the nurses to get the obstetrician into the room, but Nikolai wasn’t sure the doctor was

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going to make it. “You need to hold your breath and bear down hard.”

The bed was quickly broken down and transformed. The nurses draped the area for the impending arrival of the baby. A team from the nursery entered the room and stood off to the side, ready to intervene if anything was wrong with the baby.

“Daddy?” The midwife addressed him with a smile. “Take Mama’s foot in this hand and cradle the back of her neck. Kiki?” She seemed to have a long-standing rapport with their doula who took Vivian’s other foot.

Scrunched up in a ball, Vivian exuded pure feminine power as she tackled the hardest phase of the process. In the back of his mind, he knew pushing could take hours in some cases, but judging by the response from the midwife and doula, Vivian seemed to be breaking a record. Seemingly consumed by her need to birth their son, she stared at a spot on the ceiling and inhaled slow, measured breaths before bearing down with each contraction.

One, two, three, four pushes and suddenly the midwife was urging her to breathe and stop pushing. He kept his eyes focused on Vivian’s face. She broke concentration as the pain overwhelmed her and glanced at him with an expression of sheer torment twisting her beautiful face. Grimacing, she clutched at his shirt and arm and whimpered. Sweat raced down her hairline and

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soaked the top of the gown. Tears dripped from the corners of her eyes.

“On this next contraction, bear down and push, Vivian,” the midwife urged. “Your baby is ready to be born.”

“Breathe through the pain,” Kiki coached. “Embrace it. *Own it.*”

Vivian inhaled a deep breath and began to push. She expelled a loud cry and primal growl as their son was gently guided into the world by the midwife’s skilled hands.

When Lev was placed on Vivian’s chest, Nikolai felt woozy. It had all happened so fast he almost didn’t believe it was real. Vivian sobbed as she gingerly touched their tiny baby boy. Her fingers were shaking as she smoothed them along the wisps of dark hair atop his little head.

A nurse stepped in to suction the baby’s mouth and cover him with a towel. The stimulation of being rubbed clean was all he needed. Like a little lion, their son roared powerfully, clearing his lungs and throat and turning bright red as he punched the air and wriggled in search of his mother’s comfort and heat.

Oblivious to the pain, Vivian hugged their son close and turned tearful eyes toward him. Her voice thick with emotion, she said, “Kolya.”

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“*Solnyshka.*” Leaning down, he shared a kiss with his wife that nearly took him out at the knees. Gutted by the experience of watching their son, their first child, come into the world, he held onto the bed rail with one hand and used the trembling fingers of the other to hold Lev’s tiny hand. Remembering what Romero had said back at the cabin, he pressed his forehead to Vivian’s and whispered, “Look at what we made.”

“He’s perfect, isn’t he?”

“He’s absolutely perfect,” Nikolai agreed.

Somehow he managed to keep it together enough to cut the cord. After that, the next couple of hours passed in a blur of activity. He walked Lev to the nursery to be weighed and bathed, but only after making sure Vivian would be all right without him. The paranoia that someone might try to take his son or harm him was so strong. He stood in a designated area of the nursery while staff weighed and bathed and dressed Lev.

By the time Lev was ready to come back to Vivian’s post-partum suite, she had showered and changed and was in bed finishing a meal. As soon as she was done, the nurse who doubled as a lactation consultant aided Kiki as they helped Vivian bring Lev to her breast for his first nursing.

Nikolai stood next to the bed and watched with a mixture of awe and wonder as his wife mastered this

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new skill. He tried to take in all of the advice the consultant and doula offered, but he began to feel jittery as if coming down from a high. Slowly he became aware of the rattling noises coming from their hospital bag. He unzipped the side pouch and realized their friends were blowing up their cell phones with text messages and phone calls.

Certain that answering all the messages would take forever, he decided to send Yuri and Lena the news first, mainly because Yuri had agreed to be Lev's godfather and Lena was a social networking queen who would make sure anyone and everyone knew the baby was here.

Lev is here. 7 lbs 3 oz. Vee was amazing. She's resting now.

A knock at the door drew his attention from the phone. He tucked it away in his pocket as a nurse entered the room with a familiar paper bag in her hand. "A friend of yours dropped this off at the desk. He didn't want to bother you, but he said that he wanted to make sure you had a good meal tonight."

"Thank you." Nikolai took the sack bearing the Marquez bakery logo from the nurse. When Sophia had been born last year, Nikolai had sent a hot lunch from Samovar to Dimitri. It seemed his friend was now returning the favor.

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While Vivian nursed Lev, he took a seat in the corner of the room and enjoyed the breakfast burrito and Mexican pastries Benny had sent him. For a late night meal, it hit the spot. When he reached inside for a napkin, he spotted the note written on the inside. Kostya's handwriting was easy enough to recognize.

Hospital is locked down. Our friends are in the nursery and on the floor.

Nikolai wasn't the least bit surprised that Kostya had arranged a way to control access to their room and the baby. More and more, the cleaner had taken on a role that could only be described as that of the under-boss. More and more, Nikolai wondered if it wasn't time to shake up the organization a little...

A short while later, the nurse left and so did Kiki, but not before squeezing him in a bear hug. The doula caught him off-guard and had her arms wrapped around him before he could sidestep her. He awkwardly patted her back and thanked her while Vivian smiled at them from the bed.

Alone with his wife and his son, Nikolai eased onto the hospital bed and gently adjusted the hat keeping their baby's head warm. Curled up against Vivian's breast, Lev seemed content with his cushiony sleeping place. "He's very quiet."

"He's sleepy like his mommy," Vivian whispered, her eyelids drooping badly.

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“Let me take him.” Nikolai waited to see if she would object to having the baby taken from her. Her mothering instincts to fiercely protect her child had been activated by his birth, and she seemed a bit possessive about holding him. It was a natural reaction, he supposed, especially after the primal experience she had just endured.

“I’d love that.” She willingly relinquished their son into his arms. He carefully supported Lev’s head and cradled him close to his chest while Vivian rearranged the blanket he had been swaddled in and tucked the loose end a bit tighter. She dropped back against her pillow and smiled up at him. Her eyes glimmered with love and warmth. “You look wonderful like that.”

Nikolai swallowed hard. His throat tightened as he gazed down at his son. The dark ink curling around his arms seemed so harsh and cruel compared to the cherubic innocence of Lev’s sweet little face. Feeling vulnerable but brave, he admitted, “It feels good to finally hold him.”

Vivian touched his arm. “I love you. So much. I couldn’t have done this without you.”

“Yes, you could have. Because you are the strongest person I know, Vee.” Holding Lev close, he bent down and captured her mouth in a kiss that he never wanted to end. “I love you doesn’t even come close to what I feel right now.”

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“It’s enough,” she assured him. “It’s more than enough.”

Nikolai waited until Vivian had finally succumbed to exhaustion before carefully standing. He sat in the rocking chair near the bed and began to rock slowly. While Vivian had been pregnant, he had never been able to clearly picture a moment like this. A father and his baby in a rocking chair? It wasn’t exactly his *thing*.

Yet here he was, rocking and cuddling the tiniest, most wonderful thing he had ever seen. Lost in the possibilities of his son’s future, Nikolai marveled at the baby he held. His nose, his ears, his eyes and mouth—there was so much that was familiar about Lev.

In the quiet, dim hospital room, Nikolai was consumed by thoughts of his own mother and father. What had it been like for his mother to go through a pregnancy and childbirth alone as a young and vulnerable teenager? Had Maksim come to the hospital? Had Maksim held him as a baby? What had his mother dreamed of for him? Had she known that he would someday become a powerful, feared mob boss? Or had she dreamed that he would be a doctor or lawyer?

Lev started to fuss, and Vivian was instantly awake. Nikolai wasn’t sure what he had done, but it became clear that Lev simply wanted to nurse again. He handed the baby back to Vivian and sat at the foot of the bed while she sleepily put their son to her breast and tried

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to get him to latch correctly. When it didn't work, he hesitantly reached out to help her. She cast a thankful but embarrassed smile at him as they figured out how to make breastfeeding happen together.

A nurse peeked inside the room and softly asked for permission to come inside to check on Vivian. He tried not to hover as the nurse made sure his wife's blood pressure had normalized, and she didn't have a temperature. When all was well, the nurse quietly retreated.

He waited for Lev to fall asleep again before taking him from Vivian who nodded off within seconds of handing off their son. Feeling energized and protective, he returned to the rocking chair and cradled the baby. His mind was racing with thoughts of all the new and wonderful experiences that awaited him, but also with the deep-seated worries that he would fail this sweet little boy who depended on him.

When the first pink and orange rays of sunshine streaked across the sky, Nikolai rose from the chair and walked to the windows overlooking the city. As the sun rose in the sky, he closed his eyes and let the heat of the rays penetrating the glass wash over and warm him. Down below, the city bustled with activity.

Brushing his lips across his son's head, he murmured in Russian, "Do you see that? This city? Houston? It's *our* city."

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Until that moment, he hadn't truly understood the implications of having a son. Maksim and Luka had called the boy his heir, but Nikolai had never acknowledged those claims. It hadn't felt right...until now.

"Someday, this will all be yours." Nikolai swore then and there that he would continue to build legitimate business and real power that his son—that his children—could inherit. "Everything I do is for you and your mother." He swallowed around the ball of emotion trapped in his throat. "You are the luckiest boy in the world to have the mama you do. Someday, you'll understand how wonderful she is, how beautiful and strong and brilliant. Someday, you'll be just as amazed by her as I am."

Lev had opened his eyes and blinked slowly as Nikolai talked to him in Russian. His son couldn't understand a word coming from his mouth, but he didn't let that stop him.

"I'm not a good man. I've made so many mistakes. But I'll be a good father to you. I'll be a good father and a good husband, and you will always know how much you are loved." His eyes burned, and he blinked rapidly to clear them. He swore on his life that his son would never know the hunger and pain and trauma and abuse that had ruined his own childhood. "You and your mother are the reason I breathe."

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Lev had worked one of his small arms free from the swaddling blanket and bumped his fist against Nikolai's finger. A moment later, he captured it—and Nikolai's heart nearly burst in his chest. The love he felt for his son overwhelmed him. A tear slid down his cheek, but he didn't wipe it away. For one of those rare moments, he allowed himself to feel *everything*.

Because, as he held Lev and watched the brilliant winter sunrise, he felt as if he had stepped through a doorway into a new world.

And a new beginning.

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I am a New York Times and USA Today bestselling author. When I'm not chasing after my wild preschooler, I like to write super sexy romances and scorching hot erotica. I live in Texas with a husband who could easily snag a job as an extra on the History Channel's new Viking series and a sweet, rowdy and always entertaining special needs daughter.

I also have another dirty-book writing alter ego, Lolita Lopez, who writes deliciously steamy scifi and paranormal erotic romance tales for Ellora's Cave, Forever Yours/Grand Central, Mischief/Harper Collins UK, Siren Publishing and Cleis Press. Lo was named of LATINA magazines Eight Erotic Authors to Watch in 2013.

You can get updates on new releases by [visiting my website](#), [signing up for my newsletter](#) or liking my author page on [Facebook](#).

ROXIE'S BACKLIST

Her Russian Protector Series

Ivan (Her Russian Protector #1)

Dimitri (Her Russian Protector #2)

Yuri (Her Russian Protector #3)

A Very Russian Christmas (Her Russian
Protector #3.5)

Nikolai (Her Russian Protector #4)

Sergei (Her Russian Protector #5)

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Sergei, Volume 2 (Her Russian Protector #5.5)

Nikolai, Volume 2 (Her Russian Protector #6)

Kostya (Her Russian Protector #7)—Coming Soon

Alexei (Her Russian Protector #8)—Coming Soon

Danila (Her Russian Protector #9)—Coming Soon

The Fighting Connollys Series

In Kelly's Corner (Fighting Connollys #1)

In Jack's Arms (Fighting Connollys #2)

In Finn's Heart (Fighting Connollys #3)

Debt Collection

Collateral (Debt Collection #1)

Collateral 2 (Debt Collection #2)

Past Due (Debt Collection #3)—Coming Soon

Paid in Full (Debt Collection #4)—Coming Soon

Her SEAL Protector

Close Quarters

Seduced By...

Seduced by the Loan Shark

Seduced by the Loan Shark 2—Coming

Soon!

Seduced by the Congressman

Seduced by the Congressman 2

Erotica

Chance's Bad, Bad Girl

Halftime With Craig

Tease

Eddie's Cuffs 1

Eddie's Cuffs 2

Eddie's Cuffs 3

Disturbing the Peace

Quid Pro Quo

Search and Seizure

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