

Sneak Peek #3

Sergei (Her Russian Protector 5)

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Grunting, Sergei reopened the water valve to the house and swiped his sweaty forehead with the back of his hand. The stifling, muggy May heat made the simple tasks he'd undertaken seem to last ten times as long. Wondering why he hadn't immigrated some place cool and dry, he replaced the heavy metal cover protecting the shutoff valve and trudged back to the porch.

He used the kitchen towel he'd draped over the railing to clean off the muck sticking to his toes and the soles of his feet before entering the house. Once inside Bianca's home, he surveyed the quick fix he'd done on her front door. He had found some extra lumber in one of the bedrooms she had turned into a workspace and had used it to patch up the splintered door. The lock was a lost cause so he nailed a board into place to keep the door shut for the night.

"All done?"

"Almost," Sergei replied and checked the board to make sure it would hold. When he turned to face her, a streak of heat raced through his stomach. His dick throbbed at the sexy vision before him. Clad in a silk robe, Bianca leaned against the doorway between the living area and the entryway. Her bare legs peeked out from beneath the modest hem to tease him. The thought of pushing her up against the closest wall and kissing his way from the very tips of her toes to the hidden vee between her thighs hit him hard.

She held out an ice cold beer. "I thought you could use this."

Surprised by the offer, Sergei accepted the chilled longneck and took a slow drink. The flavor of it pleased him and he glanced at the label. "This is good. It's not a brand I recognize."

"A friend of mine runs a microbrewery attached to his restaurant. I'm not normally a beer drinker but I'll sip one of his any day."

He hated that the mere mention of a male friend sent darts of irrational jealousy right through him. He had no right to feel that way. Bianca wasn't his. She was free to date any man she wanted, but that didn't make it easy to stomach the thought.

After another drink, he gestured upstairs. "I'm going to check the shower."

"Okay." She didn't make a move to follow him. Was she afraid to be close to him?

Heading back upstairs, he made a mental list of all the things he needed to pick up at the hardware store. He was relieved to find the shower turned on and off without issue. As he replaced the shower curtain and put the rod back into place, he studied the poorly done tile. It would all have to be ripped out. In fact, the tub and shower surround needed to go too.

Leaning back against the counter, he scanned the bathroom and started to mentally sketch some ideas for renovating the space. It was larger than most bathrooms in houses this old. A walk-in shower would go beautifully in the corner and a claw foot tub would fit perfectly in a spot right over there. He envisioned a crisp, clean honeycomb tile pattern on the floor, a new set of custom cabinets and marble countertops.

Sergei would jump at the chance to help Bianca restore her home to its former glory but would she allow him to work with her? He knew for a fact that she had been taking bids from other contractors for various projects around the place. Even if he came in with a rock-bottom bid, she'd probably laugh in his face and send him on his way.

Facing the mirror, he frowned at the dirt and grime marking his hands and chest. He'd smeared rust on his face while working. Mud and flecks of grass clung to his pants. Wanting to get cleaned up, he shucked his pants and boxer briefs and stepped into the shower. The tepid water blasting his skin made him move a new hot water heater to the top of his shopping list. He grimaced at the floral scent of her soap but lathered up with it anyway.

After drying off, he wrapped the damp towel around his waist and examined his tuxedo. There was no way he was getting back his deposit now. In fact, he'd be lucky if the rental place didn't come after him for damages. There was no way he was slipping back into the wet fabric tonight. He considered asking Bianca to run out to his SUV to

grab the gym that held two changes of clothing. The sound of her moving around in her bedroom gave him another idea.

Her earlier reaction to the teasing kiss he'd placed on her cheek emboldened him now. What if he went for it? No more sweet and playful overtures that she could so easily shoot down. It was time to be brave and maybe even the slightest bit brash.

Wearing only the towel, he opened the bathroom door and stepped into the bedroom. She had her back to him as she arranged an outfit on the back of her closet door. He could tell by the modest cut of the pretty green dress that she planned to wear it to church. He hadn't been joking earlier when he'd said he wanted to hear her sing.

Judging by the look she'd given him, Bianca must have thought he was crazy. He'd long ago stopped caring what other people thought of him. When he wanted something, he went after it. The hell with other people's opinions.

"I guess the shower works?" She draped a wide belt over the hanger holding the dress.

"Yes."

"Great. I really wanted to thank you for..." Her words drifted off when she pivoted to face him. Her dark eyes flashed open, and she gestured wildly to his mostly naked state. "Where are your clothes?"

"They're wet and dirty." He didn't even bring up the jeans and T-shirt tucked into his gym bag outside. He wanted to see how far this would go.

"So put them on, go home and throw them in the dryer." Her voice had risen to a slightly higher pitch. What was she so afraid of? Was it his size or his criminal ties? Or was it something else? Was she afraid of how good they would be together and how hard it would be to push him back outside that fence she'd built around herself?

"I'm not going home tonight."

She blinked. "Excuse me?"

"I broke down your door." He gestured in that direction. "I'm not leaving you alone in a house that can't be properly secured, especially when you have a prowler bothering you." He tilted his head. "Unless you want to come home with me?"

"No!" She hastily shot down that option.

"Then I'm staying here." He took a step toward her bed and started to remove the plush, decorated pillows. She had the sort of bedroom that looked like it was straight out

of a designer catalogue. Though why one woman needed nine pillows on her bed perplexed him!

She held up her hands. "What are you doing?"

He tossed a fringed pillow onto the floor behind him. "It's late. I'm tired. I'm getting in bed."

"Not in this bed," she retorted sharply. "You can go sleep in the guest room down the hall. Pick up those pillows and stack them neatly on that bench on your way out."

Gathering the fluffy, girly pillows in his arms, he carted them to the upholstered bench she had indicated. He carefully lined up the pillows as she had asked but didn't leave her bedroom. "There's no way I can fold myself into that daybed."

The irked expression on her face softened. With a sigh, she reached for one of the normal-sized pillows tucked inside ruby-red silk. "I'll go. You stay here."

"Is that really what you want?"

She gulped and hugged the pillow tighter. "Yes."

"You are a terrible liar, Bianca."

"I haven't had much practice."

Holding the pillow like a shield, she skirted the edge of the bed and headed for the door. In three quick, long strides, Sergei intercepted and blocked her. She gazed up at him, a mix of apprehension and the faintest flash of excitement brightening her dark eyes. He gripped the pillow and tugged it from her hands.

She licked her lips, betraying her nervousness. "What are you doing, Sergei?"

"No more, Bianca." He tossed the pillow onto the bed behind her. "We're done playing this game."

"What game?"

"The one you've perfected." He stepped closer, and her smaller hands flew to his chest. He could have easily overpowered her, but he immediately halted his forward motion. "Bianca, I would never use my size or strength against you."

"Sergei..."

"No." He placed a gentle finger to her mouth, silencing her rejection. "One kiss, Bianca. You let me kiss you properly one time. If you don't feel anything—if you really don't want me—I'll go downstairs and sleep on the couch. After I fix your door in the morning, I'll never bother you again."

Her perfect white teeth dug into her lower lip. Finally, she nodded. "Okay. One kiss."

Grinning triumphantly, he slid his hand along the nape of her neck and dragged her against him. He was determined to make this a kiss they would never forget. If he only had one chance, he was going to make it count!