

SERGEI (Her Russian Protector #5)

By Roxie Rivera

Sneak Peek #2

I shouldn't have waited to have that glass of wine. The nice buzz from my favorite Shiraz might have softened the blow of just how bad my attempt at renovating this bathroom had really gone. Standing there under the spotty, stuttering spray of tepid water and examining my embarrassing failures as a DIY home remodeler, I just wanted to cry.

The rainfall showerhead leaked horrendously. I'd clearly missed a step during the installation. Eying the rattling faucet with trepidation, I wondered how many more uses it had before it finally died. The low temp and pitiful amount of pressure snaking through the pipes convinced me a plumbing problem was brewing. I cringed at the thought of how much it would cost.

Running my fingers along an uneven seam of grout, I reluctantly admitted that the pretty tile I had painstakingly applied earlier in the week would probably have to be ripped out and redone. Not that it would take much work to tear the tile from the wall. Just touching that section now made it wiggle precariously.

With a sigh, I stepped forward to rinse the soapy lather from my body. When I turned to rinse my back, I accidentally knocked my elbow against the wall—and dislodged that entire strip of tile. I gasped and tried to catch the tiles hooked together by a mesh backing but they landed right on my foot. I shrieked with pain and yanked my foot free.

Bad move!

Losing my balance, I flailed wildly for anything to stop my fall. Grabbing the showerhead, I managed to steady myself for a fraction of an instant before the damn thing came right off in my hand. A blast of lukewarm water splattered my face. I lurched back to escape the spray and began to tumble out of the tub.

Panicked, I screamed and grasped the shower curtain and liner in one final desperate clutch but it wasn't enough to save myself. The plastic rings popped loose, and I was in free fall.

"Oof!" I hit the floor hard. Thankfully the plush bathmat cushioned my fall but I still winced as pain lanced my bottom and back. "Ow!"

Over the whirring rush of water spilling into the tub, I thought I heard a crack of thunder. The sound confused me because the skies were clear and there hadn't been even the slightest chance of rain in the forecast. Another loud boom and then another met my ears. What in the hell?

And then I heard the unmistakable sound of Sergei's voice.

"Bianca!"

Still dazed by my fall, I wondered if I was hallucinating. Why would Sergei be yelling for me? Why would he be inside my house?

"Bianca!" It sounded as if a bull was running up the stairs and barreling down the hallway. Those heavy footsteps echoed in my bedroom. Without warning, the bathroom door flew open, and suddenly Sergei appeared. I blinked and tried to reconcile the sight of him in my home.

His handsome face screwed up with concern, he scanned the scene in front of him before exhaling with what seemed to be relief. "Thank God. I thought someone was trying to attack you, *milaya moya*."

"Not someone," I groaned my reply. "Just my shower."

Too tall to come through the door without ducking, Sergei also had to turn his shoulders because they were too broad to fit through the frame. He crouched down next to me and brushed his scarred knuckles along my cheek. "Are you all right? Do I need to take you to the emergency room? Did you hit your head?"

"No, only my pride is wounded."

Sergei gently grasped my upper arms and hauled me into a sitting position. The movement made me cringe with discomfort. "Ow. Okay. My bottom is probably bruised."

A mischievous smile curved that sinful mouth of his. "I'd be happy to take a look at it for you."

Reminded of my scandalously underdressed state, I tugged the shower curtain that was wrapped around my body a little higher, just to make sure my cleavage was totally covered. Ignoring Sergei's flirtatious offer, I pointed to the door. "Would you please grab my robe?"

"Later," he said softly and slid his arms under my body. Showing me just how strong he was, Sergei lifted me up off the floor and cradled me to his chest.

Eyes wide, I stiffened. "Put me down! You're going to break your back."

"Don't be silly." He actually smirked. Pivoting, he carried me out to the bedroom and carefully placed me on the bed. "Don't move."

Hugging the shower curtain around my naked body, I watched him return to the bathroom. He disappeared behind the door for a minute, probably to survey the damage in the shower, before returning with my fluffy robe and a folded towel. Chuckling, he held them out to me. "So I guess we've learned a valuable lesson about choosing the proper grout and preparing our surface before tiling."

Scowling at him, I grumbled, "In my defense, those DIY blogs make it seem so easy."

"That's their job." He crossed those massive arms of his. "I did warn you that this was too much work to be done alone."

Trying to forget how good it had felt to have those arms holding me tight, I concentrated on that January morning at my boutique when he had helped me pin the hem on Vivian's wedding gown. "No, you said it was man's work. In a very condescending tone," I added for good measure.

His smile faded. "That was wrong of me. I shouldn't have been condescending. I'm sorry."

I shrugged. "It's okay. I mean—I guess you were right." Dropping my gaze with embarrassment, I gestured to my throbbing foot. "Maybe I am in over my head here."

Sergei stepped closer and knelt down in front of me. He cupped my foot in his big hand and my pulse sprinted. His fingertip traced the swollen splotch there. "You'll have to wear some sensible shoes for a few days, but you'll be fine."

Swallowing hard, I murmured, "You haven't seen my closet. A sensible shoe cannot be found in there."

He snorted softly and gently lowered my foot. "I'm not surprised." His thumb drew a circle around my ankle. "But you do make those impractical shoes look so good."

His compliment took me by surprise. Mouth dry, I tried to think of something to say. Sergei didn't seem to notice how he had affected me. Rising up to his full height, he patted the shower curtain. "You should get into your robe now. Do you have a tool set?"

I nodded. "It's in the guest room across the hall."

After he lumbered out of my bedroom, I shook myself from the temporary stupor of being touched by him and quickly unwound the shower curtain. I was tying the robe's sash when he returned. The comical look on his face made me smile. "What?"

He held up a tool bag and the hot pink hammer. "Pink tools? Really?"

"They're designed for a woman's hand," I said rather defensively.

"They feel like toys in mine."

"Well, you're like a seven foot tall giant. All sorts of normal-sized things probably seem like toys to you."

Sergei's lips parted but he snuffed out the witty comeback burning the tip of his tongue. I couldn't help but wonder what it was that he hadn't said—and why.

He inclined his head toward the bathroom. "I'll get your shower fixed and then we'll talk."

"About?"

Sergei's burning gaze swept over me. "Us."

Not giving me a chance to pipe up with my usual rejection of the very thought of there being an *us*, he spun on his heel and disappeared into the bathroom. Feeling totally off-kilter with that big sexy beast of a Russian pattering around in my house, I dabbed at my wet skin with the towel. What did I do now?

There had to be an easy way to get him out the front door without making it too weird. As I rubbed on some lotion and tried to figure out what to say to him next, a terrible clatter erupted from the bathroom. Sergei swore roughly in Russian and English—and was that Spanish too?

Curious, I approached the door and caught him stripping out of his soaking wet shirt and toeing off his shoes. My breath arrested in my throat. My God! I had no idea a man could look *that* fine.

He was all lean, smooth muscle without even a hint of fat. I counted the rippling ridges of his abdomen and wondered what it would feel like to run my hands over his powerful body. Oh, I would definitely take my time tracing those tattoos he kept carefully hidden under his clothes. The small gold medallion dangling from a thin chain around his neck interested me.

Images of Sergei leaning over me in bed, my thighs wrapped around his waist as he thrust into my slick, womanly heat tormented me. The tempting sight of him melted the icy wall I had erected between us. Suddenly, I started to question why he was so wrong for me.

As if he felt my intense gaze, Sergei glanced at me. "Where is your water shutoff valve?"

"My what?" His mundane question threw me.

"The water shutoff," he repeated. "Have you been having problems turning your water on and off here at the shower faucet?"

"Oh. Well...yeah." I looked to the shower where a blast of hot water spewed from the broken pipe there. It seemed even stronger than earlier. No doubt that had been the cause of Sergei's cursing. "I bought a replacement faucet and the tools to fix it, but I wasn't sure how to start."

"You need to shut off the water and bleed the line first. There's no local shutoff here so we'll have to do it outside."

"Wait. Is that the funny little handle thing in that box outside?"

Sergei's mouth slanted to one side. "Yes, sweetheart, it's the funny little handle thing."

There was only warm amusement in his voice and no condescension to be found. I refused to allow myself to dwell on the way my belly quivered at the sound of him calling me sweetheart. Flicking my fingers, I turned away from him. "That shutoff is outside in between the rose bushes."

"Of course it is," he grumbled. "Wait. Here. I brought this for you."

Spinning to face him, I watched him retrieve my cell phone from the pocket of his tuxedo jacket. "How in the world—?"

"Vivian," he said. "She borrowed it from your purse."

"Borrowed, huh?" I rolled my eyes at her interfering. "I love that girl but she knows how to push my buttons."

Sergei chuckled. "Try guarding her. She's impossible to keep out of trouble."

"Sounds stressful." I shuddered to think what Nikolai would do if Vivian was ever hurt under Sergei's watch.

"You have no idea." He held out my phone. "I suppose we should thank her. If I hadn't been at your door when you fell—"

"Hey, wait a second." I held up my hand as another thought struck me. "How the hell did you get inside my house?"

"About that..." Sergei rubbed the back of his neck and made an apologetic face. "I know a guy who builds custom homes. He uses a lot of antique reproductions. I'll call him first thing in the morning to get you a new door."

"A new door?" Mouth agape, I left the bathroom, crossed my bedroom and strode out to the landing. Leaning against the handrail, I gazed down into the entryway of my home to see wooden shards and splinters scattered across the floor. The door hung lopsided on its hinges. A good breeze probably would have knocked it over. "Oh. My. God."

"I'm sorry."

Startled by the closeness of his voice, I glanced back at him in awe. He now stood less than two feet behind me in just his tuxedo pants. "How do you move so quietly?"

He shrugged those broad shoulders of his. "It's a useful skill."

I decided to not to ask him why he needed that particular skill. Looking back toward my destroyed door, I asked, "Did you use a sledgehammer?"

"No, my foot."

"Are you freaking serious?" I turned around and examined his huge feet. They were surprisingly nice with neatly trimmed nails. "You can tear down a door with your legs?"

He smiled. "I can do a lot of things with my body that would amaze you."

"Uh-huh." I didn't even try to stop the grin that tugged at my lips. "You never quit trying, do you?"

Sergei closed the distance between us and placed his big paws on either side of me on the handrail. Boxed in by his massive, half-naked body, I gulped. The amount of

body heat pulsing off of him stunned me. He lowered his face until we were breathing each other's air. "Not when it comes to a woman as special as you."

Me? Special? For a moment, I considered this was part of his game, but then I realized he was dead serious. He really thought I was something special.

My belly trembled as his mouth descended toward mine. Heart racing with anticipation, I held my breath and waited for the touch of his lips. At the last second, he diverted his landing and playfully pecked my cheek. Even though it wasn't the kiss I wanted, I still felt an electric jolt of contact.

He must have seen the slight disappointment in my eyes because he smiled sweetly and dragged his finger along my jaw. "I'm going to head outside and shut off your water. If you'll put a broom and dustpan near the door, I'll clean up that mess."

"I'll do it."

Sergei shook his head. "I made the mess. It's my responsibility."

He backed away from me. Immediately I missed his closeness and wanted him back. As I watched him head downstairs and out the door he had demolished with those tree trunk legs of his, I finally understood that Sergei was much more dangerous to me than I had ever imagined.

I'd finally gotten a taste of how sweet and gentle and protective he could be—and already I wanted more.