

## Five Golden Rings

### IVAN

With Christmas music playing softly in the background, Ivan Markovic sipped some of the sweet and slightly spicy Mexican hot chocolate that Erin loved so much. The woman he intended to claim forever as his own sat cross-legged between his perch on the leather sofa and the Christmas tree she had festively decorated the day after Thanksgiving. His back still twinged from hauling the huge thing inside the house and moving it a dozen different times until it was situated *just* right in front of that window.

The constant adjustments and the four different tree toppers she had insisted he climb the ladder over and over to exchange had frustrated him at the time, but he had experienced only joy when she had wrapped her arms around his waist and grinned up at him. "Our first Christmas tree!" she had said so excitedly.

The words she had used had filled him with the most incredible sense of peace and hope. Yes, their first but far from the last. This morning, he would make sure that they would spend every Christmas for the rest of their lives together.

"Are you ready for another gift?" She took a bite of one of the fluffy, mint-flavored marshmallows from Benny's bakery.

"Yes." He smiled when she clamped the marshmallow between her teeth and moved onto her hands and knees to gather more gifts from under the tree. The red and white striped nightgown she wore rode up on her bottom and gave him a tantalizing flash of thigh. Since Erin had moved in with him earlier in the summer, he had kept to the routine of waking her up every morning with a fantastic romp. This morning, however, she had scampered out of bed before he could snatch her close and slide between her thighs.

"This one is from me." She presented him with a wide, heavy box.

"Another one from you? Erin, how many gifts did you buy me?"

"This is the last one." She glanced at her own pile from him. "Like you should be talking! Look at all this! I'll be opening gifts until Valentine's Day."

He eyed the stack surrounding her. "I might have gone a little overboard, but it is our first Christmas together. It should be special."

She smiled at him and finished eating her marshmallow before opening another gift. He lifted the lid on the box she had given him and found a photo album beneath the tissue paper. While he took another drink of the addictively delicious hot chocolate, he curiously flipped the cover of the album, turned the first two blank pages—and promptly choked on the hot, sweet liquid in his mouth.

There, in black and white, was an erotic photograph of Erin. Flat on her back atop a silky sheet, she wore skimpy lace lingerie and playfully teathed the strand of pearls he had gifted her a few months earlier. The photographer had highlighted the ribbon accents of her lingerie with hot pink pops of color.

Swallowing hard, he glanced over at the little vixen who had ensnared him the day she had bravely entered his gym and asked for his help. She nibbled another marshmallow and eyed him with amusement. "Do you like it?"

"You should have warned me before I opened this box. I nearly choked to death."

She giggled. "So I'll take that as a yes."

"Yes, *angel moy*, I like it very much." He turned the page to find her in the same lingerie but in an even more provocative pose. "Please tell me you still have this lingerie."

She snorted with amusement. "I do. All three sets from the album are hidden upstairs. I thought I would let you choose which one I wear first."

Turning the pages and becoming increasingly more aroused, he had a troubling thought. Clearing his throat, he asked, "Where did you take these?"

She grinned playfully. "Guess."

He narrowed his eyes. Jealousy burned through him at the idea of another man seeing her this way. "Was it a man? Because if it was—"

She rolled her eyes at his possessiveness. "It was Vivian."

He blinked. "Vivian?"

"Yep. Vivian."

He considered the young woman who waited tables at Samovar and seemed so completely innocent. Could a woman like that understand such sensuality? "I don't believe it."

"Lena and Benny helped style the shoot, but Vivian was the one who sketched out the ideas, took the photographs and did all the editing to make each photo so beautiful. I told her that she should consider offering boudoir shoots as a side business."

Ivan couldn't help but wonder what Nikolai would think of that. "The copies of these photos?"

"They're on a flash drive in your office safe. Vivian did all the printing in her studio so we're the only ones who have seen them."

The jealousy within him faded. "Have I upset you?"

She laughed. "No, baby, I've gotten used to this alpha male thing you do."

Loving the way she called him baby, he let his gaze fall back to the erotic photos. The fireplace crackled, and Erin pushed up off the ground. She grabbed another log from the stack he had carried in the day prior.

"Careful, *milaya moya*," he urged, worried she would burn herself.

"Ivan," she said with an exasperated laugh, "I'm a big girl. I can handle adding a log to a fire."

"I know." But his protectiveness toward her would never fade. He thought of recent discussions he had shared with Dimitri as his friend prepared for the birth of his first child. When it was time for him to make a baby with Erin, would the same fears beset him? Undoubtedly yes.

Her chore finished, she returned to her spot on the floor and continued unwrapping gifts. "We'll need more wood brought inside if you plan to keep the fires going here and in our bedroom tonight."

"I'll take care of it after lunch."

"Are you going to use the ax again?"

He heard the hopefulness in her voice and smiled. "Some of the wood will probably have to be cut down, yes."

"Please tell me you're going to wear that sexy flannel shirt again."

He still couldn't believe how easily she was aroused by him doing manly things like fighting or chopping wood. "Of course, *angel moy*. Whatever you want...as long as I get what I want when I'm finished."

"Ivan, I'm probably going to get so hot watching you act like a big, sexy man beast that you'll be lucky to get inside the back door before I'm riding you like a cowgirl."

Heat flared in his lower belly as the image of Erin bouncing on his cock flashed before him. Seemingly oblivious to the way she affected him, Erin continued opening gifts. He thumbed through the album and set it aside to look at the other gifts she had given him. While he scanned a new book, she began to pick up the mess they had made, stuffing the scraps of paper and ribbon into a trash bag that she had fetched from the kitchen.

Ivan's mouth went dry as he recognized the moment was upon him. Though he had been planning and playing out this scenario for weeks, his courage fled. What if he was wrong? What if Erin wasn't ready to be a wife? Or worse. What if she didn't want to be *his* wife?

Those old doubts crept up on him. Despite his successes in business and life, he feared he wasn't good enough for her. The sins of his time in the mob would never truly leave him. The tattoos marking his skin were a constant reminder of those dark deeds.

The sweet, gentleness of Erin had soothed the beast within him. She made him want to be a better man. For her, he would do anything. For the chance to build a family with her, he would give anything.

Heart racing and fingers trembling, Ivan waited for Erin to come close to the couch. "Angel, you missed a piece."

She crawled toward him. "Did I?"

He lifted the piece of wrapping paper he had earlier arranged and revealed the box hidden underneath. Erin eyed him suspiciously and reached for the box. She gasped when she noticed the four simple but beautiful rings in rose, white and yellow gold he had tied onto the decorative ribbons and bow. "Ivan?"

"I wanted to get you some jewelry. That Christmas carol talks about giving your true love five golden rings so I thought why not?"

"But there are only four golden rings on here," she said, touching each one.

"Open the box, Erin." His heart beat so rapidly now he had a hard time breathing.

She did as instructed—and sucked in a shocked breath. She gazed upon the engagement ring nestled inside the box for a long moment. When she finally met his questioning gaze, he took the box from her hand and removed the ring he had designed for her. It was a big, brilliant round diamond surrounded by dozens of tiny diamonds set in a delicate gold band with exquisite scrollwork accents. He couldn't wait to see it on her finger.

"Come here." He didn't think proposing while she knelt at his feet was right. He wanted her to be his partner in life, not his servant. Sliding his arm around her waist, he hauled her onto his lap and peered into her beautiful eyes. "I love you, Erin. I didn't

even know if it was possible for me to feel this way until you. You were the first for me—and the last. It's you I want. Only you."

She placed her small hand against his jaw. Her eyes shone with unshed tears. "Ask me, Ivan."

"Marry me, Erin? Build a life with me, *angel moy*."

"Yes." Her lower lip trembled, and she threw her arms around his neck. Pressing her face into the curve of his throat, she let loose a little sob and whispered, "Oh, Ivan, I love you so much."

"I love you, *angel moy*." He wrapped his arms around her and tried not to squeeze her too tightly. His heart threatened to burst with joy. "I'll make you happy, Erin."

"You already make me happy."

"We'll have a good life together. I promise you that."

"I know we will." She leaned back and caressed his face. He grasped her hand and dragged it down so he could slide the ring onto her dainty finger. "It's so pretty."

"You like it?"

"So much," she assured him. "It's perfect."

He pushed her bangs back and nuzzled their noses together. "Kiss me, Erin."

She tenderly touched her lips to his. The barest brush of her mouth was like a spark to dry tinder. His lust ignited, Ivan deepened their kiss, relishing the sweet, minty hint of the marshmallow that clung to her tongue. Whimpering, she clutched at him and broke their kiss. "Take me upstairs, Ivan. Make love to me."

Standing up with her cradled safely in his arms, he kicked aside the wrapping paper in his way and carried her across the living room and upstairs. There were times when being a big, strong man was incredibly useful—and this was one of them.

When he reached their bedroom, he gently placed her on the bed. Mouths mating, they tore at each other's clothes and were soon naked. Flushed with the heat of desire, her blazing hot skin seared his. Ivan reined in the raging need to ravish her and chose instead to take his time loving her. Now that she would be his forever, there was no need to rush.

Propped up on his elbow, he claimed her lips in an endless series of kisses and ran his palm over her breasts and belly. Though her thighs fell open in silent invitation, he held off touching her so intimately. He marveled at the sight of his larger, rough-looking hand moving over her supple skin. His tattooed fingers and gnarled, busted knuckles were so harsh compared to the smooth expanse of her unmarked skin. When she entwined her fingers with his, he understood how oddly matched they were—and yet how perfectly she balanced him.

Erin cupped the back of his head, scratching her nails over his scalp, and arched into him. Her stiff nipples grazed his chest and reminded him how much he loved tormenting them. Dropping his head, he circled the pink flesh with his tongue before suckling her. He bit down gently, just enough to make her hiss, and then soothed the reddened peaks with his tongue. She cried out with pleasure and bucked against him, urging him on with her rapturous sounds.

When both of her nipples were wet and puckered, he returned to her mouth, tasting her and loving every moment of it. His hand finally found its way between her thighs. He probed her carefully and with the utmost gentleness. Hot and slick, she

responded so sweetly to his ministrations. He strummed her clit with a pace that was meant to arouse but not bring her to a climax.

Wanting to touch him, she slid her hand down between their bodies and stroked his cock from the very tip to the base and back up again. Already he was leaking pre-cum and dying to bury himself in her snug pussy. Erin's hand slid even farther down to cup his sac, causing him to groan as she fondled him so expertly. Her other hand clutched at his thigh, her nails biting into his skin, and she flicked her tongue against his lower lip.

"Now, Ivan," she begged. "I need you now."

He shifted until he was between her thighs, and she wrapped her shapely legs around his waist. Still holding his cock in her small hand, she pushed him through the pink petals of her sex until he was perfectly aligned. With one fluid thrust, he sheathed himself in the welcoming heat of her. Touching his forehead to hers, Ivan retreated until only the tip of him was buried in her before thrusting forward again.

They writhed atop the bed, their passionate coupling growing more frenzied with each passing minute. He nipped at her neck, marking her with his teeth. He loved the way her pussy fluttered around him, clenching and squeezing him with every love bite. Rubbing her clitoris, he drove his cock into her again and again. "Come with me, Erin. Come for me, *angel moy*."

Crying out, she found her release in his arms. The spasms of her pussy pushed him right up to the edge. Still panting and shuddering, Erin clung to his shoulders and gazed up at him with such love in her eyes. His entire future was reflected in those green irises. Heart swelling in his chest, he punctuated every thrust of his hips with a sweetly whispered, "I love you."

Holding him close, Erin returned his whispers of love and urged him on toward his climax. Trying to draw it out, he focused on her beautiful face and captured her lips. He hovered just on the edge for a moment before finally surrendering to the blissful heat gripping his core.

Sliding deep, he spilled his seed, all the while wishing for the day it would take hold in Erin's womb. She had shown him how wonderful life could be when he had someone to love, spoil and protect. He yearned for the day when their house would be filled with the sounds of their children.

Resting his head against her breast, Ivan repositioned the weight of his body just to the side of her and embraced her waist. He listened to the fast beat of her heart and tried to fight the sleepy pull that always hit him after they made love. Erin's soft hand petting his head didn't help. "You're going to put me to sleep."

"So?"

"So we have things to do."

"Like?"

Suddenly, he couldn't think of anything.

"It's Christmas, and we've just gotten engaged. As far as I'm concerned, there's no reason to get out of bed today."

He kissed her breast. "That's a tempting idea."

"It's the best idea." She wiggled a little and found a more comfortable position.

"Pull up the covers, baby. I'm freezing."

He reached down, grabbed the fluffy comforter she had chosen for their bed and dragged it over their rapidly cooling bodies. "I've got a few ideas for keeping you warm."

She giggled and snuggled into him. "Just for today?"

"No," he kissed her lovingly. "I'll keep you warm always, *angel moy*."