

SERGEI, VOLUME 2 (Her Russian Protector #5.5)
Roxie Rivera
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Chapter One

Stretching my arms overhead, I inhaled a deep, slow breath and gradually awakened to the sound of a running shower. Blinking, I rolled onto my side and slid my hand over the empty space next to me. The sheets were still warm under my palm. Unable to help myself, I lowered my face to the silky cotton and pressed my nose against the fabric to inhale that familiar, comforting scent of eucalyptus and *him* that made every morning utter perfection.

Sergei.

My Sergei.

Smiling like the Cheshire Cat, I dragged his pillow closer and tugged the sheet that was twisted around my thick hips up around my naked breasts. Hugging his pillow, I let the memories of yet another torrid night together warm me. Since discovering I was pregnant, Sergei had been insatiable yet so tender with me. For such a powerful giant, he could be incredibly gentle when the moment called for it. It amazed me sometimes that those big hands that had so brutally pummeled his opponents glided over my curves with the lightest touch of a feather.

But even though his touch was soft and his pace languid, Sergei still managed to make me see stars at least twice a night. *Four last night*, I thought with a naughty giggle and burrowed against his pillow. I didn't remember much after the third climax he had coaxed from me with that wickedly skilled mouth of his, but what I did remember left my body thrumming with a sensual heat.

"You're awake."

My eyelids parted as his gruff, rumbling voice made my belly flutter. I found him leaning against the frame of the open bathroom door. With a towel wrapped around his waist, he eyed me in that predatory way of his. I let my appreciative gaze travel across those wide shoulders and his insanely sculpted chest. The bruises from the tournament had finally faded to a pale yellow, the edges rimmed with darker spots of purple and even green. My gaze moved over his abs right down to the dark trail that stretched from his navel to the top of the towel. Knowing what he had hidden beneath that towel made everything feminine in me sing with joy.

Mine. Mine. Mine. He's all mine.

"I'll be quieter tomorrow." He pushed off the door frame. "I wanted to let you sleep in this morning."

"You didn't wake me."

Sergei snatched up a piece of ginger candy from the box on the bedside table and unwrapped it. He eased onto the bed beside me and held it up to my lips. I accepted the little treat that seemed to be keeping my morning sickness under control. The evening of the barbecue we had hosted for friends, I had been hit with the first really awful wave of it. After our guests had left and I had curled up in bed, he had disappeared to the store

and had returned with just about everything ginger the twenty-four hour drugstore had on its shelves.

While I let the small candy dissolve on my tongue, he ran his hand along my thigh. The heat of his palm blazed a trail through the sheet. His hand slid higher and finally rested on my belly. "You need more rest." He rubbed a slow circle there. "You're doing hard work growing my baby."

The reverent way he spoke the words made my heart swell with love. Getting pregnant so unexpectedly hadn't been part of the plan, but I didn't regret that one night we had made love without protection, not for a single moment. Becoming a mother was a daunting prospect, but I could facing anything with Sergei beside me.

He traced a heart on my stomach, and I smiled at the sweet gesture. "What do you think it is, Bianca?"

"I don't know." I bit my lip. "Do you have a feeling?"

"No."

"Do you have a preference?"

He continued to draw shapes. "A healthy baby is all I want." His mouth twitched with the hint of a grin. "If it's a girl, I'm going to be gray before she's even out of high school. She'll probably have a thing for bad boys like her mama."

I laughed and covered his hand with mine. "I don't have a thing for bad boys. I have a thing for one very bad boy in particular."

He leaned forward and cupped the back of my neck. Teasing his lips against mine, he claimed my mouth in a lingering kiss. His thumb brushed my cheek, and he pulled back to gaze into my eyes. "You're so beautiful in the morning. This is my favorite way to see you."

I lifted a skeptical eyebrow. "Oh, really? With my hair a mess and my face blotchy and—"

"You look like you were thoroughly fucked last night," he said in that blunt way of his. "You look like a woman who came so hard that she passed out with a smile on her face." His sexy grin made my heart race. "Seeing you this way makes me proud of my work. You're always so perfectly put together. I like knowing I'm the only one who can make you look like this."

"Well," I said quietly, "when you put it like that..."

"Bianca?" He tipped my chin with his fingers until our gazes met. "I love you."

My heart soared. "I love you, too."

I didn't think I would ever get tired of hearing him say those three words. I had never expected that I would win the heart of a man like Sergei. Sometimes I still couldn't quite believe that he had chosen me. With his outrageously good looks and that killer body, he could have had any woman—and had done just that. But for some reason, it was me that he had fallen for after one meeting. It was me that he had chased for five months. He had kicked down a door for me and so much more.

He had left the mob for me, for us, and I would never, ever forget that. We had beaten the odds to be together, and I would fight until my dying breath to protect the life we were building. The searing heat of the love reflected in his eyes told me he would do the same thing. Without question or hesitation, he would fight for us.

"I'm going to pick up a new suitcase while I'm out today. Do you need anything?"

I shook my head. "I'm good on the luggage front."

"Are you sure you still want to go to London?" His gaze fell to my stomach. "If you're too tired or don't feel well, I'm sure Vivian wouldn't mind."

"I know she wouldn't, but I would. I feel fine. Really," I added, certain he was worrying too much. "Pregnant women travel all the time. Besides, this is Vivi's first international art show. I want to be there."

"So do I, but I would feel better about you going if you were able to see your doctor first."

"They can't fit me in until we get back from London. I spoke to the nurse-midwife for, like, twenty minutes on the phone. She said that as long as I'm not cramping or spotting, there's nothing to worry about and that they prefer to see patients around eight weeks. I'm not even six weeks, Sergei. Lots of my friends didn't get in for their first prenatal visits until ten or eleven weeks."

"I don't like it," he grumbled.

"You worry too much." I sat up a little higher against the pillows and didn't even bother to tug the sheet up to cover my chest. Just as expected, Sergei's hand immediately covered my bare breast. He seemed to remember how sensitive I was as he cradled my flesh so carefully.

"I love you, and you're pregnant with my baby. I'm supposed to worry." His thumb drew a lazy circle around my nipple. With a note of awe in his voice, he murmured, "You're starting to change. See?"

I noticed how much darker my skin looked, the puckered peaks the deepest shade of cocoa and so much different than his lighter, tanned skin. "From what I've heard, this is the first of many changes."

His finger trailed along the swell of my breast and up toward my collarbone. "Are we doing anything tonight?"

"I have that meeting with Mama."

Sergei's lips settled into a grim line. "Oh. *That.*"

"Yes. *That.*" Once a month, I attended a support group for families who had lost a loved one to murder. My mother had been the local chapter's president until the stroke and ensuing complications that had taken her leg and left her hospitalized for months. Even while in recovery, she had never stopped working as a victim and family advocate though. Now she was getting back into the swing of things, and I was happy to share the load with her. "You could come with us. It might be good for you to talk about—"

"No," he cut me off quickly, but I wasn't easily shut down.

"You could talk about your brother and his wife and your nieces," I finished my thought.

"And say what?" He stared at me with an expression of incredulity. "My name is Sergei, and my brother and his family were slaughtered by a mob crew in Moscow because he had been laundering money for terrorists?"

He had a point. "You could say they were killed by criminals—"

"And then what? I tell them that I got my justice by selling myself to a different mob outfit who killed every single last one of those men who took my family?" He shook his head. "That's a chapter of my life we've closed, Bianca. It's done. It's finished. There's nothing to be gained from talking about my brother or his family."

"What about peace, Sergei?"

"Peace?" He laughed harshly. "Bianca, there's no peace to be had on that score. I've accepted that they're gone. All the talking in the world isn't going to bring them back."

"It's not about bringing them back," I hotly retorted. "It's about honoring their memories. It's about finding a way to forgive the people who hurt you. It's about finding a way to live every day with that gaping, raw wound that losing someone to murder leaves behind."

"Forgive?" He practically spat the word. "Forgiveness is weakness."

With all the hormones raging through my body, my emotions were too close to the surface. My eyes prickled with heat, and I felt the first tears drip onto my cheeks. Annoyed with myself for getting so worked up, I snapped at Sergei. "Why do you have to belittle this?"

He looked utterly crushed and ashamed. Cupping my face, he whispered my name and wiped away the tears. "Bianca, *milaya moya*, I didn't mean to upset you. I'm sorry. It was stupid of me. I didn't mean to belittle your work. I know what this group means to you." He kissed my forehead. "I'm sorry. You're a better woman than me to find forgiveness for your brother's killer. I can't. I just—I can't."

Knowing the life he had escaped, where a weakness could get him killed, I accepted that forgiveness was beyond the scope of possibility for him. Feeling even worse for blowing our disagreement out of proportion, I inhaled a ragged breath. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to flip out like this."

"It's all right." He rubbed my back and pressed his lips to mine. "You're pregnant. I think this is normal." He nuzzled our noses together before capturing my mouth in a loving kiss. "I understand that it brings you peace to talk about your brother and to fight for other victims. I admire that about you and your mother. I truly do—but it's not for me."

I gripped his hand. "I understand."

"We're okay?"

I nodded. "We're okay."

"Good." He lifted my hand and kissed my fingers. "Would you like to bring your mother over for dinner? I can cook."

"Is this your way of reminding me that we haven't told her about the baby yet?"

"This is my way of suggesting we do it sooner rather than later," he replied honestly. "She needs to find out before we tell my family when they meet us in London next week."

"I know."

Sergei tapped the tip of my nose. "Why are you so afraid to tell her? She's your mother, and she loves you."

"I know that."

"But?"

"But she's old-fashioned when it comes to things like this," I murmured. Until Sergei, I had been an old-fashioned kind of girl myself. The thought of having a baby before marriage had always secretly scandalized me. How many brides had come through the front door of my family's wedding boutique with tiny baby bumps? I had artfully concealed those round tummies with pleats and tulle and empire waists all the while silently judging those women for being careless. Now who was the careless one?

"She'll love this baby as much as she loves you," he reassured me. "She might not be happy about the circumstances, but she'll come around, Bianca."

"It's not just that," I admitted finally. "I feel guilty for taking away the white wedding dreams she's probably always had for me. We're in the business of happy endings and beautiful fairytale weddings. I'm sure she dreamed of the way it would be for me, her only daughter, and now she'll have to be happy with a shotgun wedding."

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I wanted to die. We hadn't even discussed marriage yet, but that hadn't stopped me from blurting out the words like a fool. I nervously glanced at Sergei who appeared totally unruffled by the statement hanging in the air.

Leaning forward, he kissed me so sweetly. With a smile that made my heart do wild flips in my chest, he promised, "It won't be a shotgun wedding. I'll make it beautiful for you. Perfect," he added and kissed me again. "It will be everything you deserve."

His promise made, Sergei slid off the bed and grabbed some clothing from the dresser we now shared. His calm, assured reply left me so curious. As he tugged on his workout clothes, I managed not to pester him with the million questions racing through my head. I trusted that when he was ready, he would ask.

"I'll be at the warehouse with Ivan until ten and then I'm heading over to the construction offices." He tugged on his sneakers and sat on the edge of the bed to tie them. "Do you want me to make your breakfast before I leave?"

I shook my head. "I might sneak in a few more minutes of sleep before I get up for work."

He rubbed my earlobe between his fingers. "Take it easy today. Stay off your feet and drink plenty of water. It's going to be hot today so wear something light."

Smiling as the way he was so overprotective, I simply nodded. "I will."

Sergei sneaked one final kiss. "I love you. Call me if you need anything."

"I love you, too." I watched him cross the bedroom and silently counted his steps. Just as he always did, he paused in the doorway and stared at me for a moment. It was as if he wanted to memorize exactly what I looked like. I sensed that it was the way he reassured himself this was real. He had won me and my love. We were now forever entwined.

Our lives had changed so drastically in the last week. I wasn't surprised he needed to remind himself that this was actually happening. No longer an enforcer and prize fighter for mob boss Nikolai Kalasnikov, Sergei was his own man now. He was going to be a father...and a husband.

My husband, I thought with an excited thrill. Our relationship had broken all of my rules, and it wasn't the perfect storybook romance, but I didn't care.

It was *ours*. And that was all that mattered.

* * *

Arms crossed, Sergei stood outside one of the sparring rings in Ivan Markovic's world-class training center and watched the pair of fighters striking each other. Since leaving Nikolai's service, he had been tasked with finding a replacement prize fighter for the boss. Watching these two kids half-heartedly trading punches, he sighed heavily. No, these boys wouldn't do either. They were both afraid to get hit and feared pain. Fear had no place in the ring. It was the easiest way for a man to get hurt.

Growling like a damned bear, Ivan shouted an instruction at the dark-haired fighter and then leaped the ropes with the ease and grace of a smaller, lither man. The sleeveless shirt he wore displayed his thick, tattooed arms. Here in the comfort of his gym, Ivan didn't bother to cover up the marks that told the world about the violent, sinful life he had once lived. He watched the two kids in the ring staring openly at the tattoos. He had been the same way once, filled with awe and fear as he looked upon Ivan for the first time.

Sergei smirked as his mentor ripped into the young street soldiers who had been plucked from Nikolai's ranks to try their hands at bare-knuckle fighting. By the looks on their faces, they wanted to get back to making collections. He didn't blame them. Ivan was the only man in the world that Sergei couldn't take in a fight, and that was saying something.

Cursing in every language he knew, Ivan slipped between the ropes and joined Sergei as the two kids started fighting again. "Can you believe this shit? How the hell do these boys survive out there?"

Sergei shrugged and kept an eye on the two younger men who were trying to follow Ivan's instructions as they continued to spar. "It's a different game than when you were on the streets. Hell, it's a different game than when I started."

"Soft," Ivan snarled. "They're weak."

Hearing the way Ivan practically spat the word weak, Sergei remembered the way he had upset Bianca that morning. He rubbed the back of his neck as shame engulfed him. He hadn't meant it to come out so harshly. He hated the way he became so defensive when it came to that mess back in Moscow. Now that Bianca had freed him from that life, he wanted to put as much distance between himself and those old, ugly memories as possible. Going to a support group meeting to sit around and rip open that scabbed over wound? It wasn't fucking happening.

"You okay?" Ivan shot him a strange look.

He waved his hand. "I said something stupid this morning. It made Bianca cry."

Ivan winced and reached forward to grab the taut rope in front of him. "Seems to be a lot of that stupidity going around this week."

He eyed his mentor and friend. "You and Erin?"

Ivan nodded stiffly. "The honeymoon is over. It was only a matter of time until we had our first real argument."

He wanted to ask what the newlyweds had fought over but didn't. It wasn't any of his business yet he couldn't help but wonder about his own relationship with Bianca. Ivan and Erin had been together for a year, and they absolutely adored each other. Their love was unshakable and strong. He didn't know whether he should find the revelation that they fought a comfort or a concern, considering the relatively short length of his relationship with Bianca.

"Ten is getting out of prison tomorrow. I offered him one of the rooms in our house until he gets back on his feet. Erin didn't take that news very well."

Sergei had never met the ruthless enforcer everyone called Ten, but if the chilling stories told by the crews were even half true, he didn't want Anton Vasiliev anywhere near Bianca. Surprised by Ivan's admission, he said, "No, I can't imagine she would."

"It's not about his record or even what he did for the family that made her mad," Ivan explained. "It's about her sister. I won't let Ruby live with us if she ever gets out of prison."

"Because?"

"Because she's a fucking junkie who nearly got Erin killed," Ivan growled matter-of-factly. "Ruby knows how to twist Erin around her finger and manipulate her. I won't let Ruby hurt Erin again. That's a pain that cuts too deep." He exhaled a rough breath. "Erin trusts that I know Ten well enough to judge his character. He's safe to have in the house. He's done extremely violent things, but he's not a violent man."

Sergei chortled. "Is there a difference?"

Ivan pinned him in place with an icy gaze. "You tell me. Should I list all the things you did for Nikolai?"

Duly chastised, Sergei clenched his teeth and nodded. "Yeah. Okay."

"Ten did his job, and he did it well. When that robbery got fucked up, he stepped forward and took the heat to protect the family. He went inside for six years. Six. Years." Ivan emphasized with a jab of his meaty, scarred finger. "We owe him a new start."

"In your house?" Sergei shook his head. "Put him in an apartment or send him to live with someone else."

"He's my friend." Ivan watched the fighters in the ring, but Sergei could tell he wasn't paying any attention to them. He was thinking of Ten and of the history they shared. "He needs people he trusts around him now."

"And Erin? What does she need?"

Ivan shot him a warning look. "My wife is my business. When you have a wife, you'll understand that."

"Give me a few weeks, and I'll understand." He grumbled the words under his breath, but Ivan's keen hearing picked them out even over the din of raucous music blaring over the speakers and the noise of the gym.

His mentor narrowed his eyes at him and then called out to the fighters in the ring. "You two are done. Cool down. Get showered. Get the hell out of my warehouse."

The younger of the two fighters tugged his mouthpiece free while the other one bailed as quickly as possible and practically ran for the locker room. Panting and slicked with sweat, the blond asked, "What time do I come back tomorrow?"

Ivan laughed harshly. "You want more of this punishment?"

The kid shrugged. "It's the only way I'll learn."

Sergei didn't let it show that he was impressed by the kid's hunger to prove himself. He was lean and scrappy, but there was room for improvement as long as he had heart. "What's your name?"

"Boy."

"Boy?"

"Boychenko," the kid answered. The only accent to his voice was a slight hint of that Texas drawl that colored his vowel sounds in the same way it did Bianca's. "Roman Boychenko."

"You're with Arty?" Sergei held up three fingers to differentiate the Artyom he meant from the other one that ran in their circle. Boy nodded, and Sergei glanced at Ivan. If the kid was trusted to run collections for Arty, that was a good enough recommendation for Sergei. A clipped bob of Ivan's head confirmed his thoughts. "Be here at six tomorrow morning. Go easy on your breakfast or else you'll be mopping up his floors."

"Yes, sir."

Sergei watched the kid climb out of the ring and start a cool down circuit. Turning to Ivan, he made a face. "Sir?"

Ivan clapped him on the back. "You're getting old."

"Old? I'm not even thirty-five!"

"When you were nineteen how old did thirty seem?"

Sergei grunted, and Ivan laughed. Hooking a thumb toward his office, he said, "Let's talk."

When they were safely inside Ivan's office, he leaned against the door and waited. With his huge, inked arms crossed in front of his chest, Ivan looked every bit the undefeated underground champion he had been when he had retired from Nikolai's service and Sergei had taken his place. Now he trained elite fighters who fought for huge purses in tournaments and on cable television. He was one of the most sought after coaches in the mixed-martial arts world and hugely successful—and Sergei wanted to be just like him.

"Have you thought about my offer?"

"I have."

"And?"

Sergei sighed. "I want to take your job offer, but if I go full-time with you, I have to give up the construction piece the boss gave me. I can't do both."

"You don't have to do both. You work for me and take your cut from the construction." He said it so easily. "The boss doesn't expect you to swing a hammer eighty hours a week. He gave you that action as a reward for all you did for him and for the family."

"It doesn't feel right to take the money without doing the work."

"Do you have any idea how much money he made off your fists?"

Considering his own small winnings, Sergei had a good idea of the prize money Nikolai had won off his fights. "I need to square it with him first. I need to keep that construction income. Bringing my family over won't be cheap and then there's Bianca."

Ivan studied him for an unnerving moment. "Is she making you pay her back for buying you from the boss?"

He shook his head. "No. She calls it a gift. A gift," he repeated with a rough laugh. "Can you believe that?"

"Yes, I believe it. She loves you. She fought for you. There's no sweeter woman in the world than one who will fight for you."

Certain that he could trust Ivan and desperate to tell someone, he confessed, "Bianca is pregnant."

Ivan's arms dropped to his sides in shock. "Pregnant?"

Sergei nodded. "It was only one night, one time, but..."

"That's all it takes." Ivan reached back and gripped the desk behind him. "Is she upset?"

"No, she was surprised. We both were, but now she's happy. We're both excited."

"That's good. It's easier that way." Ivan hesitated. "Are you going to marry her?"

"Of course!" He couldn't believe Ivan even had to ask.

"Because you love her or—"

"Because I love her," Sergei interjected. "Because I want a family with her."

A broad smile brightened Ivan's hard face. "I'm happy for you. It's good to have a woman like Bianca in your life. She's strong. She'll make you a better man."

Sergei understood that Ivan was thinking of the way Erin had changed and softened him. "I'm luckier than I deserve."

Ivan waved his hand as if to argue that point. "When are you going to ask her?"

"Soon," he said. "I've already made some plans."

"Do you have a ring?" When he shook his head, Ivan pushed off his desk and strolled around to the back side of it. He opened a drawer, retrieved his wallet and plucked a business card from inside it. "Here. Go see Kazimir. He's the best in town. We've all used him. He did beautiful work for Erin. You've seen Vivian's rings?"

"Yes." They was so perfectly her. The boss had chosen well.

"Kazimir keeps settings that only need center stones on hand. You'll find something for Bianca there."

Sergei accepted the card. "Thank you."

"When you walk in the door, he'll take one look at you and recognize you as Nikolai's enforcer, but just in case he doesn't, you tell him I sent you. He'll take care of you."

And there it was. The way their world worked. No doubt this jeweler gave discounts to Nikolai's friends in exchange for some sort of perk—protection, a cheaper source of materials, side deals that helped him beat his competitors. Nothing came free in this world. Nothing.

"Listen," Ivan said carefully, his tone strained, "have you talked to your family about Bianca yet?"

"They know they'll be meeting Bianca in London. They know she saved me."

Ivan drummed his thick fingers on his desk. "Have you told them *everything* about her?"

A long, uncomfortable moment of silence stretched between them. Finally, Sergei said, "They know she's not like us."

Not like us. Not Russian or white. He didn't have to say the words Ivan was undoubtedly thinking. They were thoughts that had been troubling him since finding out Bianca was pregnant. He refused to burden her with the what-ifs while she was in such a delicate state, but it was possible that Lidia might have been right about his mother. She wouldn't dislike Bianca simply because of the color of her skin, but those old ingrained ideas about what was right and what was not weren't going to be easy to change. He hoped that the idea of a grandchild would soften his mother's feelings, but if it didn't...

"These things..." Ivan's voice trailed off as he seemed to be searching for the right words. "Look, we live *here* now. It's different here. Your family will meet Bianca and see how sweet she is. They'll understand how far she went to save you. They'll forget about everything else."

And if they don't? It was the question that wouldn't stop tormenting him.

Ivan stepped closer and squeezed his shoulder. "It will all work out in the end. Yes?"

With a smile that didn't reach his eyes, Sergei nodded and left the office after a quick discussion about Boy's training. After showering and changing into jeans and a polo shirt, he headed for the exit. He glanced toward Ivan's office and was surprised to see Erin walking toward her husband. As usual, she wore a flirty little dress that made her seem so carefree and innocent.

Slowing his steps, he watched the pair interact. The regret darkening Ivan's eyes and tightening his expression was clear enough. He held out one big hand, his knuckles gnarled and tattooed so heavily, and Erin smiled so sweetly at him. She interlaced their fingers and tugged him toward his office. Like a puppy trailing its master, Ivan followed her into the office and promptly shut the door. A moment later, Ivan stepped in front of the window and started to close the blinds.

Smirking and laughing softly to himself, Sergei decided that Ruby wasn't the only one who could wrap someone around her finger. Erin had managed to do what no other person had—she had tamed the beast and had him eating right out of the palm of her pretty little hand. He had no doubts that the couple would work out their disagreement.

Sergei sat in his SUV until the air conditioner cooled the interior. He smacked the card Ivan had given him against the steering wheel and decided to go see the jeweler first. Once he had the ring sorted, he would make one more stop before hitting the construction offices.

After listening to Bianca voice her fears about her mother's reaction to the news, he wanted to spare her any ugliness. If anyone was going to bear the brunt of Mrs. Bradshaw's anger, it should be him. He was the one who had seduced Bianca that night and persuaded her to let him make love to her without any barriers between their bodies. If her mother wanted to hand out a scolding, he would take it right on the chin and spare Bianca the worst. He had sworn to protect Bianca, and he meant to do that.

As he backed out of his parking space, Sergei felt an unfamiliar quiver of panic hit his gut. He had a sneaking suspicion Bianca's mother was going to make him work for her blessing and permission to marry her daughter. With a snort of laughter, he decided that the same trick that had endeared him to Bianca wasn't likely to work on her mother. Kicking down her front door to save her from a shower curtain? Not a chance in hell of that one winning over Mrs. Bradshaw.

He would think of something. He always did. Once he had Bianca's mother squared away, he would concentrate on an even bigger problem—his own mother.