

Sergei (Her Russian Protector #5)

By Roxie Rivera

## Chapter One

I *really* hated weddings.

Sipping my champagne and nibbling on the richly flavored and exquisitely decorated wedding cake, I silently acknowledged the thought was damn near blasphemy in my field. A dress designer and wedding boutique owner who groaned every time an embossed and gilded invitation dropped into her mailbox? It wasn't good for business.

Poking at my cake, I conceded it wasn't the actual wedding ceremony I disliked. Earlier in the evening, I had cried like a baby when Ivan and Erin exchanged vows. Seeing the pair make promises to each other for the life they intended to build together had touched me so very deeply. The tender moments the newly married couple had shared throughout the night left me yearning for the same thing.

It was the receptions that really ruined weddings for me. Now entering my mid-twenties, I seemed to have reached a point where it was no longer acceptable to attend a wedding solo. Without a plus-one on my arm, I suddenly earned *that* pitying look. It made my damn skin crawl.

"You look awfully pensive," Vivian Kalasnikov remarked as she slid into the empty seat next to me. Dressed in one of the strapless, chiffon bridesmaid gowns, my friend looked absolutely stunning. Her dark hair and light eyes popped against the vibrant shade of fuchsia. The diamond accents under the bust glinted in the light cast off from the flameless candles and chandeliers decorating the grand ballroom of the downtown Houston hotel.

With my longtime friend, I dared to be honest. "I'm just thinking that I need to find some more men to add to my dating pool. This business of attending weddings alone is for the birds."

She arched one of those wing-shaped eyebrows. "Maybe it's time to consider doing the opposite."

"How's that?"

"Maybe you should think about whittling down that list of men to two or three that you might get serious with, you know? Or maybe it's time to start all over and find someone new and exciting with real potential."

The mere mention of someone new and exciting filled my head with images of one extremely tempting man. Even now, sitting in this crowded ballroom and surrounded by hundreds of revelers dancing the night away, I innately sensed his presence. He loomed somewhere behind me, near one of the tables where a group of rowdy men had congregated to exchange wild tales. Every now and then a burst of laughter punctuated by a loudly spoken Russian phrase or two would erupt from that general direction. Each time, I buried the intense desire to sneak a glance at *him*.

As if reading my mind, Vivian smiled knowingly. "You know he's dying to ask you to dance, right?"

Even though she'd nailed me, I feigned confusion as I reached for my flute of champagne. "Who?"

She rolled those bright blue eyes at me. "That might work on someone else, Bianca, but it doesn't work on me. You've had your eye on Sergei since December."

Her comment spurred the memory of the chilly night Vivian and Nikolai had been attacked. Learning my friend had been kidnapped had been such a punch to the gut. The memories of the panic-filled days that followed as I waited for any news on Vivi's return were shoved aside by those of Sergei shadowing us that night during dinner and later at Faze, Houston's hottest nightspot.

The giant Russian with dark hair and dark eyes had taken my breath away from the very first moment I'd spied him. In high school, I had dated a couple of basketball players so I thought I knew tall men but that was before Sergei. With the broadest, sexiest shoulders I had ever seen, he had to be nearly seven feet high. He had a strong aquiline nose and a sinful mouth that tempted me like no other.

And that was bad. Really, *really* bad.

Feeling Vivi's pointed stare, I shrugged and sipped my champagne. "I'll admit to looking at the merchandise, but I'm sure as hell not about to try it on or take it home with me."

"I don't know," she said a bit conspiratorially. "I think my curiosity would get the better of me."

I snorted rather indelicately. "Please! Those moon-eyes of yours for Nikolai have made you blind to every other man in creation!"

Smiling and not even attempting to deny my assertion, she glanced just to her right and easily zeroed in on her husband. As if connected by some sixth sense, the devastatingly handsome Russian cast a smoldering gaze her way before returning to his conversation with two men I didn't recognize.

A longing pang squeezed my heart. God, I wanted that. I wanted a man to look at me as if I was his entire world, as if he couldn't breathe without me.

Beside me, Vivian took a drink from the glass of clear, fizzy soda she'd brought with her. I'd never known her to be a fan of the lemon-lime flavored drink and ticked another box on the list in my head. Earlier that morning, I had rushed over to her house to let out the bust of her bridesmaid dress. In all the years I had known Vivian, her weight hadn't fluctuated once yet this morning her bosom seemed to have swelled a full cup size.

I'd been taking in and letting out wedding gowns and bridesmaid's dresses since high school so I had easily put two and two together. More than one panicked bride had called either me or my mother into her dressing room on her very special day to make adjustments for a baby belly that just happened to make its debut at the most inopportune moment.

As far as I could tell, Vivian's tummy remained flat and toned but that full C-cup she now sported? Oh, that was an undeniable clue. Add to that the glass of wine she hadn't touched during dinner and the caffeine-free soda in her hand now? There weren't many scenarios other than pregnancy that fit the bill. Even so, I didn't ask her to confirm my suspicion. Certain she had her reasons for keeping the news quiet, I tamped down my curiosity.

The sight of Benny Stepanov waddling toward our table brought a twitch of amusement to my lips. The empire waist of the bridesmaid dress and wispy, light chiffon enhanced her rounded figure. Heavily pregnant and due any day, the petite Latina lowered her body into a chair with a loud sigh and rested a hand on her belly. "My dogs are barking tonight!"

"Well, why are you wearing heels?" Vivi demanded with a humorous glint in her eyes. "Erin told you to wear flats. She wanted you to be comfortable and to take it easy."

"Have you seen how tall my husband is?" She gestured toward the imposing blond. Arms crossed and a grin on his handsome face, Dimitri exuded raw sexuality and power. I wasn't surprised she was already expecting their first baby. With a man like that heating up the sheets, how could any woman resist his charms? "I'd like for us to have a picture or two where both of our heads are in the shot, you know?"

"So sit together," Vivi pointed out the obvious. "I bet Dimitri would love to have you sitting on his lap."

Benny laughed and pointed to her belly. "I'm pretty sure that's how I got into this predicament."

Amid our giggling, excited shouts drew my gaze. Yuri Novakovsky had snatched up Erin right under Ivan's nose. She squealed with laughter as the billionaire magnate rushed off with her and Dimitri, Sergei and Nikolai blocked his path. The custom of stealing away the bride and ransoming her back to the groom made me grin. I had been to so many weddings over the years and had assumed I'd seen it all—but I had to give it to these Russians. Their customs and celebrations were so sweet and lighthearted and they *really* knew how to throw a party.

"Erin looks gorgeous, Bianca. That design is perfect for her." Benny shot me an approving smile. "The lace is amazing."

"Thank you. That touch was one of my mother's suggestions." I considered the gown hugging Erin's willowy frame. The design had been a tricky one because Erin had wanted so many different things—a sweetheart neckline, dropped waist, chapel train that could be bustled, beading and lace. "She wasn't an easy bride to please but I'm so thrilled with the way the gown came together."

"Will this design be available to other brides?"

I shook my head at Benny's question and let my gaze drift to the intimidating, tattooed fighter who had won Erin's heart. "No, I promised Ivan that no other woman would ever wear a dress like hers. He wanted this one to be especially for Erin and always hers."

"Aw," Vivian said with a sappy smile. "Could that guy be any freaking sweeter? I mean, you look at him and he's, like, the scariest man on the planet and then he does something so romantic like that! Erin is so lucky to have him."

"Yes, she is," I murmured a bit enviously.

Out on the dance floor, Ivan gathered Erin's smaller body to his and wrapped those brutally strong arms of his around her in the most protective embrace. I sensed she missed her older sister Ruby something fierce but the incarcerated pill addict and thief had popped positive on a random inmate drug test a few weeks earlier so any chance of her earning early release and probation had been scuttled.

Erin had been at my boutique for an early morning fitting when she'd received the call from her sister's lawyer. Though we were friends, we were nowhere near as close as I was with Vivian, but I hadn't let that stop me from hugging her and letting her sob on my shoulder as the years of pent-up frustration and hurt her older sister had caused rushed to the surface.

I still remembered the pained look on Ivan's face when he had suddenly appeared in the fitting room. Apparently their lawyer had called him with the update on Ruby's situation. He had instinctively known that Erin would need him and come right to her. When he swept her up into his arms and called her his angel in that gruff, accented voice of his, I had understood why Erin loved him so much.

As Ivan's thick, heavily tattooed fingers sifted through her hair while they danced, I decided they were probably the most mismatched couple I'd ever met, but there was no doubting the deep and unshakeable love they shared. Flushed with happiness, Erin burrowed against Ivan's chest and closed her eyes as they swayed together.

While I tried to suppress the sadness that threatened to ruin such a great night, the universe seemed determined to dash a little more salt in that wound. Dimitri and Nikolai strode toward the table and joined their spouses. Nikolai actually slid his arms around Vivi and dragged her onto his lap so he could nuzzle her neck and whisper lovingly to her in their shared language.

Across the table, Dimitri hauled Benny's aching feet onto his lap and removed her high heels while gently scolding her and massaging her calves. Benny smoothed her hand down the curve of her big baby bump and remarked that their little girl was kicking up a storm. When Dimitri reached out to feel his daughter's kicks, the expectant parents shared a look that made my heart freaking ache in my chest.

Deciding I'd had just about enough of the universe rubbing my face in the one thing my otherwise happy life lacked, I reached for my clutch. Before I could even open

my mouth to bid everyone goodnight, a shadow fell over me. I didn't have to glance up to know that it was *him*.

All seven feet of Sergei Sakharov dropped into the empty chair next to me. Instantly my traitorous body reacted to the tremendous amount of body heat radiating from his huge frame. The faint smell of eucalyptus tickled my nose, and I had to fight the urge to inhale deeply, to imprint the very scent of him in my lungs and brain.

Casting a stealthy sideways glance, I took in the sight of him in that tuxedo. I didn't think that any man had ever made the classic black and white ensemble look so good. His tailor had fit him to sheer perfection.

Nikolai addressed him in Russian and Sergei answered back with a laugh while tugging free his bowtie and unbuttoning his collar. Inspired by the sight of him undressing just that tiny bit, I refused to let my mind travel along the rather naughty path it wanted to follow.

My heart stuttered wildly when he slid his massive arm along the back of my chair and leaned closer. Unable to avoid meeting his gaze, I shyly glanced at him. Those dark eyes of his ensnared me, made me want to slide a little closer so I could count the amber flecks in his irises. His sensual mouth curved, and it was all I could do not to finally give in to the desperate urge to kiss him just to see if it would be as amazing as I expected.

"You having a nice time?" That deep baritone voice of his made the womanly core of me clench with desire.

"Yes. You?" Somehow I managed to get out two words without stumbling over them.

"I love weddings."

"Really?" I let a little skepticism invade my tone.

He gestured around us. "When was the last time you saw people having this much fun?"

I considered his question. "Vivian's wedding."

"Exactly." His fingers brushed my bare upper arm. "Would you like to dance, Bianca?"

God, the way he said my name, his Russian accent stretching out the syllables and rolling over the vowel sounds, made me want to give in and break my number one

dating rule. I wanted to hear him saying my name *all* night long—but I didn't dare cross that line. My late brother's face flashed before me, reminding me of exactly why Sergei was all wrong for me, and I gently shut him down.

"I can't." Lifting my clutch, I gave it a little wave. "I was actually on my way home when you sat down."

"So soon?" Vivi piped up from beside me. "But the night is still so young, and Erin hasn't tossed her bouquet yet."

I turned my head and gave her a look that made her smile guiltily. I knew *exactly* what she was doing but it wasn't going to work. "I have to pick Mama up for church in the morning and get there early enough to get into my choir robes."

Sergei's fingers drew a slash across my skin. "You sing at church?"

I turned back toward him and tried to ignore the way his touch made me throb in all the right places. "Yes."

"Then I'll have to come listen sometime."

My eyebrows arched toward my hairline as I tried to imagine Sergei in one of the pews of my childhood church. Boy, would he stick out like a sore thumb!

"If you're ready to leave, I'll drive you home."

"No, thanks." I had a bad feeling I wouldn't be able to fend him off with a handshake the way I had when he'd taken me home that frigid December night when he was Vivian's bodyguard and driver. "I have my car here."

"Maybe you should let him take you, Bianca," Vivian interjected very unhelpfully. "He could check your house and yard for that prowler."

Sergei stiffened and the flirtatious slant to his mouth vanished. His jaw visibly tightened and his big hand cupped my arm. "Is someone bothering you?"

If he had been a wolf, his hackles would have raised as he turned fiercely protective...of *me*. Surprised by his reaction, I quickly explained, "It's nothing. Really." Judging by the hard set of his jaw, he wasn't buying it. "Look, I just thought I saw something the other night."

"And Monday night and last Thursday," Vivi butted in again. "The neighborhood watch guy knocked on her door to let her know he'd seen someone running out of her backyard too."

If Vivi hadn't been sitting on her husband's lap, I would have pinched her for being so dang intrusive. Instead, I had to face Sergei who wore an expression of utter irritation. "It's nothing."

"It doesn't sound like nothing. It sounds like someone is trying to break into your home or attack you."

"It's fine. I called Kevan—"

"Who is Kevan?"

I didn't miss his gruffness. "He's a guy I date sometimes. A police officer," I added.

Sergei grunted with annoyance. Lowering his voice, he slid a little closer and asked, "Why didn't you call me?"

My eyes widened. Was he for real? Not wanting to let everyone in on my personal business, I whispered a bit harshly, "Why in the world would I call you?"

Something flashed in his dark eyes. Hurt? Frustration? Why in the world did the thought of hurting his feeling make my stomach ache so badly?

"We're friends," Sergei insisted.

Were we? I tried to decide if our relationship fit that category. Sure, I spent a lot of time in his company but that was only because Nikolai trusted Sergei to keep Vivian safe. I called Sergei her shadow for a reason. They were practically joined at the hip which meant that, technically, over the last few months, I'd had dinner with Sergei more often than I had any of the men I had dated.

And—if I was being completely honest with myself—I had enjoyed those evenings when he was sitting nearby or driving us around Houston. Beneath that rough exterior, he could be such a sweetheart. That scared me more than anything. He possessed so many of the qualities I wanted in a man but the package was all wrong. He was much too dangerous for me and too damn sexy for his own good.

Even now, I couldn't fathom why this man—this outrageously handsome and sculpted model of male perfection—seemed so intent on getting closer to me. The experiences of my teenage years warned me that a guy like Sergei only wanted one thing from a girl like me. Some part of me feared this was all a setup for some colossal joke or even worse.



Maybe I was simply an itch that needed to be scratched, a curiosity that demanded to be satisfied. I didn't think my heart could handle getting trampled under that huge foot of his if it turned out he was simply wondering what it would be like to date a fat girl or if he was trying to figure out if the stereotypes about big girls in bed were true.

"Bianca?" Sergei prompted, his voice even lower and softer. "Aren't we friends?"

Meeting his questioning gaze, I couldn't lie. "Yes, we're friends."

The tight lines around his mouth relaxed. "Then let me help you."

Certain his brand of help was the very last complication I needed, I reached out and patted his cheek. "I'm a big girl, Sergei. I've got this."

He covered my hand with his, the heat of his palm searing my skin. I marveled at the way our hands looked together, his tan skin a few shades lighter than mine and his fingers so long and thick and mean-looking. "This isn't a game, Bianca. You could get hurt."

His gentle warning scared me but I refused to back down. "I won't."

Tugging my hand free, I rose from my chair and bent down to peck Vivian's cheek. Whispering hotly against her ear, I said, "You are on my list."

She gave me a hug. "I had to try. Besides, we both know you'll forgive me."

"We'll see." I caught her husband's amused gaze and touched his shoulder. "Good night, Nikolai."

"Good night, Bianca. Be safe."

"I will."

After bidding farewell to Dimitri and Benny, I skirted the edge of the busy dance floor on my way toward the exit. Ever the glamorous, jet-setting couple, Yuri and Lena happened to whirl by me. Lena stepped away from Yuri and engulfed me in a big hug. The diamonds dripping from her ears and adorning her neck felt so cold against my skin. As of now, her ring finger remained bare, but I had a feeling Yuri would be changing that very soon.

I visited the valet station and headed outside to wait for my car. Though I had left the reception early to escape the sight of so many canoodling couples, it seemed futile now. Everywhere I looked, couples held hands, laughed, made out and whispered

sweetly to one another. By the time my silver sedan rolled up to the curb, I was ready for a glass of wine and a hot shower.

After tipping the valet, I slid behind the wheel and fastened my seatbelt. Throat tight, I eased on the gas, pulled away from the hotel and tried not to think about the empty house that awaited me—and yet another long night alone.

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Sergei leaned back in his chair so he could watch Bianca leave. Despite his frustration at her constant rejection, he had to admit that this view was incredibly nice. The curve-hugging dress she wore highlighted some of her very best assets. Even now, his fingertips burned with the memory of caressing her silky skin. He had wanted to do so much more when he slid close to her chair but he hadn't dared to push her.

Every time he saw her, Bianca Bradshaw blew him away. This girl was class all the way. She managed to look so fucking sexy but without ever crossing the line into trashy or cheap. Tonight, she wore a simple and unadorned black dress that she somehow made hotter than the skimpiest lingerie. Did she have any idea how damned beautiful she was?

He bit his lower lip as he imagined what it would be like to peel that dress from her body and discover all the soft, warm delights beneath the fabric. That sweet, plump ass of hers had been made for a big man like him. Those swinging hips made him ache with desire. He imagined her straddling his lap, his hands cupping that amazing ass while her thick thighs cushioned their coupling.

He wanted her. He wanted her so badly he could fucking taste it. Since the moment he'd spied her coming into the restaurant that late December night to meet Vivian, Sergei had been blind to every other woman on the planet.

But Bianca wanted nothing to do with him.

Watching her embrace Lena, Sergei wondered what the hell it was going to take to convince Bianca that he was dead serious about her. She wasn't a passing fascination for him. He had played the field enough in his thirty-one years to know that she was different, that what he felt for her was *real*.

He rubbed the back of his neck and remembered Vivian's warning a few months back that Bianca wouldn't go for his type. Fully aware that she had lost her brother in a senseless act of violence, he understood why Bianca shied away from men who weren't strictly on the right side of the law. Though he owned part of a successful construction business, Sergei remained firmly in Nikolai's pocket. He did whatever his boss asked of him without question—and that wasn't going to work for Bianca.

She was unlike any woman he'd ever dated. There was the obvious issue—she didn't want anything to do with him. Grudgingly, he admitted his ego had taken quite a hit over that one. He'd gotten used to women tripping over themselves to go out with him. The right glance, the right smile and a few sweetly spoken words and he was assured of a date with any woman he wanted.

But none of that worked on Bianca.

He'd always acknowledged that she was out of his league. Maybe it was time to accept that she was *too far* out of his league and would never see him as anything other than the big, dumb, mobbed-up bodyguard who watched over her friend.

"Seryozha."

Hearing Vivian call him by his childhood nickname made him smile. Over the last few months, they had grown incredibly close. He thought of her as the little sister he had never had and she had admitted to viewing him as an older brother now.

Tearing his gaze away from Bianca's backside, he glanced at Vivian and asked, "Yes, Mrs. Boss?"

She grinned at his teasing reply and waved a smartphone at him. "I think Bianca left this behind."

Nikolai snorted softly and rubbed Vivian's arm. "No, I think my wife means that she stole it out of Bianca's purse while they were hugging."

Vivian narrowed her eyes at her husband. "Stole is such a harsh word, Kolya. I *borrowed* it."

Nikolai swept his fingers along her jaw. "Because?"

"Because Bianca has some creep peeking in her windows and she's too stubborn to let anyone help her." Vivian slapped the phone down on the table. "Take it, Sergei. Ride to her rescue on your white horse. I mean—SUV."

Sergei stared at the phone Vivian had taken from Bianca. It was an underhanded trick but he was a man out of options. Before he reached for the phone, he glanced at Nikolai who gave a small nod of encouragement. Feeling a flutter of hope in his chest, he snatched up the device. "Thank you, Vivian."

She shooed him with her hands. "Well—go on. If I know Bianca, she's going to crack open a bottle of wine about twenty steps inside that front door. If you catch her after that first glass, she'll be in a good mood and might even invite you inside."

He laughed as Vivian suggestively waggled her eyebrows. "I'm not going to get my hopes up. I'll be lucky if she doesn't slam the door in my face."

"She won't."

"I wish I had your confidence."

A short time later, he drove the streets of the historic neighborhood where Bianca lived and replayed their short conversation. He couldn't believe how blasé she had been about the prowler situation. He refused to even think about this Kevan guy she had asked for help.

A police officer. Of course. A man who was everything Sergei could never be for her. The very thought of Bianca seeking aid from some other man frustrated him. He wanted to be the one she thought of when she was frightened or needed help. Hell—at this point, he would take being the man who mowed her lawn or fixed a leaky pipe!

Navigating the old streets, he conceded Bianca might be right about the prowler situation. Maybe it was nothing. It could be a teenager cutting through her yard to sneak into his house late at night or something else equally as innocent.

Or maybe it wasn't. She was a single woman living alone in a neighborhood known for its spacious homes filled with antiques. Granted, she had purchased her home in a tax sale at a deep discount as a fixer-upper. He doubted she had much in the way of expensive furnishings and knickknacks but a thief might not know that.

If someone was casing her place, Bianca might be on a short-list of marks for an upcoming robbery run. He'd known enough men who ran in the B&E crowds to know that many of them preferred to hit a string of high-end houses in a night to improve their odds of success and evading the police.

The thought of Bianca being terrorized by a home invasion soured his stomach. He pressed a little harder on the gas and made up his mind that he would ask around in

the morning to see if any of the usual suspects were planning something in this neighborhood. He didn't care what it cost or how many favors he had to call in or extend. He would do anything to protect Bianca—whether she wanted his help or not.

Pulling up to the sidewalk in front of her large corner lot, Sergei killed the engine and studied her home. The Queen Anne needed a new roof and some paint but it had good bones. He had never been farther than the front door but what he had glimpsed of the interior needed a lot of work. From the conversations he had overheard between Vivian and Bianca, it seemed she was trying to do most of it herself. He had a feeling Bianca was in way over her head.

He unlatched and pushed open the gate, running his fingers over the iron scrollwork with appreciation. It clanged shut behind him, the sound so very loud in this still, quiet neighborhood, and he winced. Heading up the sidewalk, he noted the pavers that needed replacing and the spotty landscaping. An idea began to form, one that might prove to Bianca that he was worth more as a man than his shady connections.

At the door, he rang the bell twice and knocked. While he waited for her to answer, he tried to think of something witty. He wouldn't lie to her about how the phone had come into his possession. Vivian would probably kick him in the shins before their next run for ratting her out, but he'd been on the receiving end of worse. He wanted nothing but the truth with Bianca, even when it was something as small as this.

When she didn't answer, he knocked again, louder this time, and started to reach for the doorbell. Just as his fingertip pressed the button, a panicked scream ripped through the house and turned his blood cold. Another shriek of terror followed a second later.

Gripped by his protective instinct, Sergei tried the door handle but it was locked. Desperate to reach Bianca, he took a step back to examine the solid wood door and its frame. He judged the weakest spot, inhaled a deep breath and planted his foot against the spot just to the side of the lock. A satisfying crunch erupted so he slammed his foot against it twice more. The door flew inward and nearly off its hinges.

As he raced into Bianca's house, he heard a loud thump upstairs. Rushing toward the stairs, he leapt up them two at a time. "Bianca!"