

Cry Assassin

Loki Renard

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Chapter One

*'In blood and battles was my youth,
And full of blood and battles is my age,
And I shall never end this life of blood'*

-Sohrab and Rustum

Kirk strode down the sidewalk, a predator amongst the people who streamed by him lost in their own existences. To most he was a man unseen, perhaps noticed for a moment, appraised favorably for his broad shoulders and long legs, and then forgotten just as promptly. His footsteps fell with a thousand other footsteps on the busy city streets as he strode towards his destination. A slight breeze caught the tip of his silk tie, but left the close-cropped, thick, black hair on his head untouched. His face was pleasant, but not model handsome. It was the sort of face that always seemed familiar. If shown a picture of him, most people would say that they'd seen him recently, perhaps in a hardware store shopping for nails, perhaps assisting customers at the self-checkout in a supermarket. If one questioned the general public, he was everywhere. He was a taxi driver, a bank manager, that guy who'd taken their parking space the other day. He was their kid's swim coach, their ex-wife's new boyfriend. In truth, he was none of these things. He was no-one to anyone and that was just the way he liked it.

As he walked amongst the bustling crowds, the black rimmed pupils of his granite gray eyes, the parts of his body that most often drew undivided attention and remained truly memorable to even casual observers, were hidden behind dark, wire framed sunglasses. In his thirty-five years on the planet, Kirk had seen more than most men would see in their entire lifetimes. He'd certainly seen more than any sane man would wish to see. When he looked at someone, truly looked at them with the weight of his past behind him, he was not so easily forgotten. People reacted to him the way a mouse reacts to a hawk. They cowered, sometimes they shook visibly. If they were men, they would occasionally grow violent simply because of the hard threat that lived in his gaze. He'd learned to keep his eyes hidden; with sunglasses on he was almost invisible.

His destination was an office building like any other. Concrete slab pillars guarded the lobby, the silent guardians of a new age. Bored workers buzzed around the entrance like bees at a hive. They had no idea that the handsome man in the expensive, well-tailored business suit was anyone other than another client. With assured authority, Kirk ignored the receptionist's saccharine greeting and stepped into the shiny, steel elevator that smelled of cleaning chemicals and sweat. He pressed the door close button without waiting to see if anyone else wanted the elevator, and pressed the button for the basement. The interface buzzed harshly, requesting the code needed to access that level. He punched it in with a callused thumb then stood to the side as the elevator began to descend.

The basement level was filled with rows of shelves stacked with moldering boxes. He frowned, immediately disliking the layout. It was impossible to see what, or who, was lurking in the narrow rows and he was forced to proceed cautiously towards the back of the basement, where a small flickering of fluorescent light between blinds called to him. Behind every row of shelves there could be a surprise waiting for him, and in Kirk's line of business, surprises were never a good thing. Never.

The basement turned out to be empty, as he'd been promised it would be, and he made it to the

far door without incident. Turning the metal handle, he stepped into the shabby subterranean office. It was a mess. Old, damp carpet curled up at the edges and the musty stench that pervaded the entire basement was much stronger here.

Four figures occupied the room. At the back were two skin-headed men in oversized jackets, with vicious expressions on their faces. They nodded to him wordlessly. No exchange of meaningless pleasantries was necessary. This was business and everyone knew why they were there. The goons were responsible for the state of the room's other occupants, a paunchy middle aged man and a young woman. Both were taped to chairs, their mouths slathered with the same industrial tape that held their bodies prisoner. Trussed up completely, the only way they had of communicating was with their eyes, and both sets of eyes were wide with terror. The strained, puffed breaths they took through their noses sent trails of moisture down the metallic surface of the tape. Kirk stood in front of them and pushed his glasses down momentarily, taking them in over the frames. Years ago he might have felt some pang of empathy, but he'd seen too many scenes like this to be concerned by soft impulses like that anymore.

This was often the face of business in the underworld, a world he'd grown comfortable in. Where once he would have balked at the idea of detaining a man and threatening him over money, he'd quickly learned that there are layers of law in the world. There is the written law, which the majority of society obeys. There is the law as it applies to the very rich and powerful, a fact that is resented by the common people who are free to observe the imbalance. Then there is the law as understood by the ruthless outcasts who carve out empires on the fringes of the mainstream: those who run guns, drugs and flesh, those whose dealings never see the light of day. This was the world Kirk inhabited. It was a filthy, cruel world, but no less ordered than common society in its own perverse way.

He stepped forward and ripped the tape from the older man's mouth. After a gurgle of pain, the blabbering began almost immediately, the pleas for clemency, for life. If he'd known what Kirk knew, he'd have saved his breath. There was no point pleading. Anybody willing to kill a man trussed up in a chair was likely to enjoy the sight of their victim groveling before them. Defiance would have been a better option, but fear and a primal desire to appease the aggressor made the old man blubber like a baby. His name was Phil, Phil Day and he was a limp wristed importer / exporter who'd gotten in way over his head with the Russians who lurked in the background, waiting to finish the job they'd started. Kirk didn't know who the woman was; he didn't pay her much mind. She was as good as dead now that she was in this room, privy to a dirty business that should never be made known to feminine ears and eyes.

"Silence," Kirk ordered, cutting the man off with an abrupt, unsentimental bark. "You know why I'm here. Twenty million. I'm taking it before I leave here today, one way or another."

Phil's plasticine jowls wobbled in distress as his eyes became watery and started leaking tears. "Please. You have to believe me. I'm doing what I can. It's hard to ship material at the moment. They're watching the ports like hawks. I got two shipments busted this month. You have to tell Vlad I need more time."

"You don't have any more time," Kirk said with deceptive calm. He used both hands to take his sunglasses off, folded them carefully and slipped them into the breast pocket of his suit jacket. "Twenty million. Transferred to the unmarked account. Now."

"I don't have it," Phil protested. "I can get it, but I don't have it."

"Then we have a problem," Kirk purred. "I have no choice but to let your gentleman callers continue their business before I begin mine." The threat, though unspoken, was clear. He would allow the Russians to have their brutal fun before he carried out the sentence for nonpayment – death.

The two men who had been lurking silently in the back of the room stood up and began cracking their necks and knuckles. Vicious gleams of anticipation lit their eyes. They were like dogs given permission to tear at a wounded animal before the hunter finished it off. "No!" Phil almost shrieked the plea. He jerked his head towards the woman. "Take her."

Without sparing the woman a glance, Kirk rejected the deal with a swift shake of his head. "She's not worth twenty million."

"You asshole," Phil swore in a sudden, unexpected display of temper. "That's Evelyn, my youngest daughter. Take her as security. I'll get you your money."

An expression of pure disgust passed over Kirk's features before he could hide it. Phil was scum, but it took a special kind of scum to offer up their own family as security. Phil saw the look and shrewdly interpreted it for what it was, the sign of a chivalrous trait entirely out of place in Kirk's line of work. "You think I'm shit for making that deal, huh? If you don't take her as security, you don't buy me some time, the Russians will kill me and take her. Vlad wants her, special order."

The filthy chuckles from the men in the back of the room confirmed Phil's statement, and explained the woman's presence. At first Kirk had assumed she was just a secretary who'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Now he was inclined to believe Phil's story. He allowed his gaze to settle on the woman properly for the first time. He'd ignored her as an irrelevance at first, but now that she was in play, she was worth noticing.

It was hard to tell what she looked like with half her face covered in duct tape, but judging by the tight body straining against its bonds it was certain she must have taken after her mother, not the flabby lump of flesh that was her father. She was wearing a fairly conservative dress that covered her from shoulder to knee, but there were visible curves under the stiff burgundy fabric, hips that strongly suggested a classical hourglass figure. Her hair was a glossy deep brown cut in a long bob and a few silky strands had been caught in the tape when she'd been bound roughly. Above the tape her wide, caramel brown eyes held more than a note of intelligence. She was scared alright, the fast rise and fall of her full bosom was testament to that, but she didn't lower her eyes subserviently, she held his gaze in a way that almost made him think that she was appraising him the same way he was appraising her. That clear, innocent look hit him like a punch in the gut. She didn't belong here, she was not of this world.

He swore softly under his breath. There was little to no choice. If he walked, Vlad didn't get his money, Phil got whacked and god only knows what happened to the girl. If he took the deal, maybe Vlad got his money, maybe Phil stayed alive, and the girl kept her virtue a while longer. Kirk nodded, his gaze hard. "I'll take her. You've got one week to get me that money, Phil. One week. You don't get me that money, you don't see your daughter again." He made his voice menacing, it wasn't hard to do. He was angry at having been pressed into a devil's deal that could potentially see him on the hook for twenty million dollars, or have the blood of an innocent woman on his hands.

He turned to the woman and reached into his pocket. A moment later there was a flash of silver as the long, sharp blade of his flick knife sprang out from its casing. He crouched down in front of her,

making eye contact and holding it as he laid down his expectations. "I'm going to cut you free," he said in a devastatingly soft voice. "Then we're going to walk out of here like a normal couple. You put one foot wrong, you try to call out for help, you do a single thing that draws attention to us and daddy dearest will be at the bottom of the river by midnight, understand?"

She nodded slowly. "Clever girl," Kirk purred, working at her bonds immediately. He kept an eye on her, waiting for her to make some frantic attempt at escape, but she sat quite still with a quiet watchfulness, that was somehow feline, as he first freed her legs, then her upper body. Finally he reached for the tape. "This is going to hurt," he warned. He placed his thumb against her pale cheek and ripped the tape off quickly. Immediately a red rash-like mark sprang across the tender skin of her cheeks, chin and lips, but unlike her cowardly father she didn't make a sound.

Looking down at her with his hands on his hips, Kirk grunted with dissatisfaction. He couldn't walk out with her looking like that; she looked like she'd been slapped across the face. That would draw attention of the worst kind. "You have makeup?" She nodded once more, still silent, her lips pressed together firmly. "Good. Cover up that mark."

He waited in silence as she reached into the purse that had been placed under her chair and fished around in it for some foundation. Her composure was admirable as she dabbed small dots of liquid foundation onto her face and massaged it across the skin with a light touch. He knew she was afraid, he saw her fear in the fluttering of her pulse in her neck, the way she breathed quick and fast through her mouth, not her nose. She was trying to hide her anxiety, and she was doing a fairly good job. To an untrained observer, she looked perfectly calm as she reapplied the lipstick that had been smeared off on the inside of the tape. She didn't look at her father once, and no words of sorrow or comfort passed between father and daughter. Phil looked smug and satisfied as he sat there like a pale toad.

"Be in touch, Phil." Kirk put his sunglasses back on, placed his hand under Evelyn's elbow in a gentlemanly fashion and escorted her out of the room, through the dank basement and into the elevator without her saying a word. She seemed to understand well enough that her opinion of events mattered little, and if she was bitter about being traded like a pawn by her father, she certainly didn't express it. She didn't express anything at all, and Kirk found himself shooting curious glances at her more often than he would like.

In the elevator he observed her out of the corner of his eye, quickly coming to the conclusion that she was quite a beauty in her own right. Underneath the tape she'd been hiding a heart shaped face and a pretty bow mouth. Her nose wasn't perfectly tiny and pert, but rather long and aquiline; it gave her a refined appearance that worked rather well with her arched brows and pretty eyes. There wasn't much of Phil in her appearance, though she did have his height. She stood at a mere 5'5, even in her heels her head only just came up to Kirk's shoulder. A pocket Venus, that's what she was, Kirk mused to himself during the short elevator ride.

"Right this way, m'lady," he said charmingly as they stepped out of the elevator. There was no reason to be cruel to her; she certainly hadn't done anything to get herself into the situation. She did as she was told, walking with him out of the building and onto the street without any of the hysterics he feared.

His car was parked a block away. He saw a slight hesitation when he unlocked the silver beast and motioned for her to get in. This was the point of no return. This was her last chance to try to run, to

cry out for help. People were passing them by on all sides, consumed with the problems of their own lives, far too preoccupied to notice or really care about the woman and the man lingering a little too long by the car.

“Evelyn,” Kirk's voice was gravelly and low. He did not threaten her, but the native menace in his tone was designed to remind her of why she was with him and what would happen if she decided to start trouble for him now.

At his word, she crumpled lady-like into the car, swiveling her hips as her knees folded so that her derriere touched the seat and her legs simultaneously swung around, knees so tightly clamped she could have been holding a dime between them as she swept her skirt out of the way of the door and sat entirely composed, her hands in her lap.

She was a real lady, Kirk thought to himself, one of the old school ladies you didn't meet anymore. Nowadays women were hard and brash and mouthy. Not Evelyn, she'd obviously been taught when to keep her mouth shut. He made sure her door was shut securely and walked around the car, keeping one wary eye on her but also keeping an eye out for other dangers. In his world there were always dangers, even on crowded streets in broad daylight.

He entered the vehicle without incident, locked the doors and put his key in the ignition. “Seat belt please,” he said, glancing over at Evelyn, who'd not moved at all since she got in. She was acting like a china doll, but the moment he instructed her to do so, she reached for the seat belt and pulled it across her body, clipping it in place. She accomplished the task without looking at the belt itself, or at anything but some vague point in the distance through the windscreen. It was almost eerie, the level of detachment she was showing, and Kirk wondered if she'd been traumatized in some way, or if she was perhaps simple.

“Listen,” he said, fastening his own seat belt before he started the car. “My name is Kirk and I've no intention of hurting you, so you can relax.” He was not usually one to give unnecessary reassurances, but then again he was not usually one to trade nubile female flesh for Russian drug debts either. He was way off profile on this one, but he'd adjust. That was what life was about, making adjustments. You got too rigid, you failed to adapt to a situation, and that's when you started losing, making silly mistakes. Evelyn didn't so much as acknowledge that he'd spoken. Her hands were folded in her lap, her porcelain expression composed once more. “How old are you?” He asked as he pulled out into the steady stream of traffic.

“Nineteen.” The reply came quickly, but still in that calm, detached tone.

He was surprised. He'd thought she was older. The cosmetics she liberally applied to her face certainly made her look older, and the composure with which she conducted herself seemed alien for one so young. How much had she seen in her short life that she behaved this way at nineteen? “Do you go to school?”

Her glossy hair caught the sunlight as she shook her head. “No.”

“Why not?”

“My father says it is a waste of time. He says my talents lie in other areas.”

Kirk nodded grimly, his jaw set hard. So Phil thought her talents lay in other areas, did he? Other areas like being traded like a side of meat, apparently. He continued the drive in silence, taking a long and complicated route designed to shake any tails he might have failed to spot, and also to disorient Evelyn. For best results he should have blindfolded her, but it would have been difficult to do that on a busy city street without drawing attention and his enemy was attention. Being noticed was the worst thing that could happen.

He drove out to the outskirts of the city, where it was calm and peaceful, where children played on the streets and he was more concerned with dodging carelessly thrown footballs than stray bullets. Their destination was on the corner of two streets on a section ever so slightly elevated above its neighbors. It was a plain two story dwelling, the wood walls painted pristine white; the window sashes a deep blue that matched the front door. The sloping lawn was mowed and bordered by flower beds that held a riot of colorful wild geraniums protected by a waist high fence made of white pickets. "Here we are," he announced, pressing the garage door opener.

Evelyn looked vaguely befuddled. No doubt she'd expected to be dragged off to some horrific subterranean lair, but that wasn't Kirk's style. There was no better protection than the protection afforded by ordinary people. Sure he could have had an inner city apartment watched by armed henchmen, but he preferred it out here, where the air was clear and where his elderly neighbors often offered him excess lettuce from their gardens, and gave him unsolicited advice about his apparently lacking love life.

Once inside the garage, he killed the engine and waited for the garage door to close before he spoke again. "Here's the story in case anyone asks," he said. "I'm Kirk Brentwood and I work as an accountant in the city. You're a co-worker staying with me for a week whilst your apartment in the city is fumigated for bed bugs. Got it?"

She nodded quickly, glancing at him with a touch more nervousness than before. She was firmly in his world now, entirely at his mercy. "Good. Remember, do as you're told and no harm will come to you," he reminded her. "This is a good neighborhood, so refrain from hysterics if at all possible."

A door lead from the garage into the house and he ushered his captive through it. They walked through the washing room, where a pile of laundry was waiting to be done atop the washing machine, and into the kitchen, which was light and airy and friendly. There was a certain golden tone to the light out in the suburbs that cast a wholesome glow over everything it touched. That was one of the reasons he liked living out here, out here he could sometimes pretend that he lived an ordinary life, that he had ordinary concerns.

He almost didn't feel the whisper soft touch at his hip, but he certainly heard the sound of a gun being cocked. His gun. Evelyn backed across the kitchen, the gun trained on him, her innocent brown eyes suddenly hard.

He smirked at her. "Impressive," he drawled, taking a step towards the fridge.

"Don't move!" she barked the order at him, her lips thinning with determination. He ignored her forceful request and opened the fridge. It was well stocked with cold meats and cheeses and he paused a moment before settling on a pastrami and Swiss combination.

"I have your gun," she reminded him, her voice rasping in the background, made husky and raw by the adrenaline surging through her tender young body.

"You do," he agreed, elbowing the fridge door closed and placing his choices on the counter top. The bread bin was a few inches away and he slid it open. A ciabatta loaf he'd picked up that morning before heading into the city awaited him.

"Aren't you afraid I'll shoot you?" Evelyn lost the battle with her curiosity as he pulled a bread knife out of the knife block. The flash of light on the silver blade made her hold the gun a little stiffer, but he didn't let that worry him. This was far from the first time a gun had been trained on him. The fact that her finger was drifting around the trigger concerned him slightly, but it was obvious from the way she held the weapon that she wasn't accustomed to such things. That meant the wavering finger was more likely a result of poor trigger discipline, not any real desire to shoot him.

"Let's think about what happens if you shoot me, shall we?" He removed the thin end of the loaf and carved two thick slices of bread as he spoke with her in entirely conversational tones. "Mrs Kransowsky next door hears it. She calls the police almost immediately. You're seen running and picked up, taken to jail and charged with either murder if you manage to hit me anywhere that matters, or assault with a deadly weapon if you miss, which is more likely." He quirked a brow at her as he laid a slice of pastrami on one piece of bread. "You go to jail, and your daddy dies." A slice of cheese followed the pastrami, then another layer of meat, and another of cheese all placed by capable, calm fingers.

"Fine," Evelyn said, the gun wavering in her hands as her muscles began to grow tired of holding the weight of the pistol out in front of her like some sort of talisman. "Then I'm leaving now. Don't try to follow me."

"You want to escape?" He smirked cruelly. "Be my guest. The Russians will look for you and sooner or later they'll find you." He placed a piece of bread on top of the sandwich and glanced over at her casually. "My guess is sooner rather than later," he drawled before bending his head to the task of cutting the crusts off the sandwich. "And when they find you Princess?" He slashed the sandwich into quick halves, using the knife with the assured motions of a man who considered it an extension of his body. "You know what they'll do to you? They'll use you until they're done with you and then they'll set you to work somewhere." It was a crude, harsh insinuation, but Kirk knew all too well that he spoke the truth, and a muted version of the truth at that.

"I wouldn't do that," she bit back, her voice thick with disgust at him and his kind. She was doing a damn fine job of maintaining her composure, but there was a tremor to her lower lip that belied her bravado.

"You would. They'd give you drugs, drugs so addictive that after one dose you'd do anything, anything at all to get another hit." He turned to her with a half-smile. "Sandwich?"

"I'm not hungry," she said bitterly, turning her head away from him as she put the gun down on the counter, giving up on her grand idea of escape. He resisted the urge to rush for it. Instead he bit into his sandwich, savoring the taste. He was glad she'd pulled his gun on him actually, glad because it finally gave him some insight as to her character, insight he'd been lacking when she sat next to him like a doll, not moving or speaking. She was tougher than she looked.

“Go have a seat in the lounge,” he said, overtly taking charge of the situation once more. He'd never lost control of course, but she didn't know that. She thought that she was playing him. The quiet demure act was just that, an act. He couldn't wait to see what emerged now that she knew her ploy had failed.

It didn't take long for Evelyn to start displaying her true colors. Instead of the ladylike motion she'd used to enter the car, she almost stomped into the lounge and basically flopped into a wide, comfortable arm chair, her legs splayed, but still pressed together at the knees. She might have been angry and petulant, but she was still a lady. Kirk smiled to himself at the change. She was off balance, good. Her plan had failed and now she would have to come up with a new one. He was determined to make sure she didn't have a chance to formulate one that would work. She folded her arms over her chest and stared at him with hostile eyes as he wolfed his sandwich down.

“You're a bad man.”

He chuckled at the child like cadence of the observation. “Am I now?”

“Yes, and bad men always get their comeuppance. Always.” She spoke with a sheltered, self-satisfied smugness that seemed genuine. He cocked his head to the side, wondering if she really believed that. If she did, she was simple minded. He made no effort to educate her at that moment. A simple woman would be easier to control than a recently disillusioned simple woman.

“As I'm a bad man, you'd better be careful to keep on the right side of me,” he said conversationally. “Here are the rules. You don't leave the house. You don't go near the windows. You can eat and drink anything you want in the house, but if you need anything you can't find here, you tell me and I'll get it for you. This is one week you'll survive easily if you follow those rules. If you decide to test them, you'll regret it in more ways than one.”

He let the threat hang between them, unspecified. She'd seen enough to know that he could make her life unbearable if he chose to do so, but he had no intention of harming her seriously if she decided to test his resolve. Kirk had better ways of handling a misbehaving woman, ways that would leave Evelyn's cute rounded behind stinging for days.

Chapter Two

Staring at her captor with muted loathing, Eve forced herself to remain calm. She was angry. Angry at her estranged father, who had lured her in and used her as bait, angry at the gangsters who had trussed her up with foul words and fouler threats, and even more angry at this man, this arrogant fool who appeared not to be afraid of death.

At first she'd been afraid that he might hurt her when he got her alone, but it was clear now that he intended to wait until the week was up. She was worth something to him, no, she wasn't worth something, her body was. She should never have answered the call that told her to meet her father at his office to discuss tuition for the coming year. She should have gone with her first impulse, to call him a liar and go to work. She was scraping together some savings as a waitress. It had been only a matter of time until she had enough to go to college on her own dollar. Now that plan lay in ruins. Even if she escaped now, she'd missed a shift without calling in. At Ringo's that meant you'd fired yourself.

She should have walked out when she had Kirk's gun, should have just gone. She couldn't have cared less what happened to the sack of shit that was her father, but she had no desire to be used to recover his debts, and from what Kirk was saying, that was the plan. Tearing her eyes away from her lean jailer, she looked around the lounge, trying to distract herself from the thoughts that were leading her into panic's clammy embrace. It was a pleasant enough space, lit naturally through large windows covered with net curtains. The furnishings were homey. A large television was mounted on the wall, but the furniture was oriented around a gas fireplace. She imagined that on cold winter's nights the heavy curtains that hung at the sides of the windows could be closed, the fireplace would be lit, and the room would be toasty-warm and cozy.

Kirk's eyes never left her. She felt him watching her even as she looked around the place, trying to form a fixed opinion of the man. In the basement he had scared her. He'd seemed ruthless and dangerous. Even the Russian gangsters had treated him with respect. Here in his home with his jacket shrugged off his shoulders, his shoulder holster empty, he still seemed powerful, but he was far more relaxed.

She raised her eyes and met his for a long moment. He smiled, but it wasn't a real smile, it was the smile of a charmer, the smile of a man who knew how to make a lady swoon. It didn't reach the magnetic, gray eyes which remained aloof. He was handsome, she decided. He had a dancer's body, muscular shoulders, but lean hips. Would he be capable of chasing her down if she ran from him? She was in pretty good shape, but men were usually faster than women. Perhaps if she got a head start, then she might have a chance. He chuckled at her, and this time the amusement did reach his eyes. "Look at you sizing me up. Are you planning on attacking me, little one?"

The casual endearment sent a jolt through her body. He thought her little. He thought her weak. And why not? Had she not deliberately cultivated that impression with her painted lips and painted fingernails? Had she not silently acquiesced to all he demanded and come with him as a willing prisoner? He thought himself smart, she could see that, but he was not as smart as she was. She was still several steps ahead of him and though he had the upper hand, she was determined that it would not be for long.

"Violence is abhorrent," she replied with a sniff of derision.

He smirked. "So naive," he purred, settling himself onto the cream leather couch. "It is a great pity that your father put you in this position, Evelyn," he said with mock empathy.

Eve didn't let herself believe for a moment that he felt any sympathy for her. No, this man was cold, calculating. Until her father had thrust her into the deal he hadn't bothered to give her a second look. He would have let her die down there if she hadn't proved useful to him. She did not reply to what was clearly an invitation to conversation. From the moment he'd had her alone, Kirk had been trying to draw her out into conversation. A sillier, more vapid girl might have thought that he was genuinely interested, but Eve knew precisely what was going on, he was trying to find some hook through which he could control her. The less he knew about her the better. That was why she let him think that she cared about her father's fate, why she'd been pretending to be concerned when he threatened the old man with death. She was advertising a weakness that did not exist.

"I'm going to take a shower," he announced at length when she did not speak. She thought she sensed some irritation in his tone. It didn't scare her, she rather enjoyed it. The idea that she had the power to make him uncomfortable pleased her greatly. "Remember those rules," he said, giving her a hard look before he strode out of the room.

She heard doors opening and shutting and then she heard the shower go on. He was really going to take a shower apparently. He was arrogant enough to think that his threats and warnings were enough to keep her sitting there placidly. She smirked to herself. Her play acting had paid off. He thought her dull and compliant.

Eve waited until she heard the rhythm of falling water change as it started hitting his body and not the bottom of the shower, then she took her purse and tried the front door. It boasted some heavy deadbolts, but they were easily slid open from the inside and it was otherwise unlocked. With a broad smile on her face, she walked out the front door, down the garden path and let herself out the little white picket gate.

It was tempting to run, but running would draw attention from the nosy neighbors he'd mentioned. She didn't want any old biddies pointing her out, so she kept her speed down to a brisk walk as she looked for a way out of the neighborhood. Her prayers were answered when she rounded the block and saw a bus stop. An elderly woman and a disinterested teen boy were both waiting there, which told her a bus should be on its way shortly.

The wait for the bus was the most tension filled wait she'd ever had in her life. At any moment Kirk would discover that she was missing and then he would come tearing out of the house looking for her. She was only a few hundred yards down the street and the corner would not protect her forever. She checked her watch what felt like a hundred times, even though she had no idea when the bus was due. One minute passed, then two and she was certain that by now Kirk would be out of the shower. Would he have checked on her and discovered her absence? Or was he too arrogant to believe that she would dare defy him?

Three minutes ticked by, then four. At four minutes, the distant rumble of a bus made her heart leap with glee and the square, squat outline of the vehicle as it slowly came into view was one of the most beautiful things she'd ever seen.

Five minutes. Six minutes. The bus had pulled in at a stop further up the road. She shifted

impatiently from foot to foot, willing it to start moving once more. In the distance behind her she was almost certain she heard a door slam. It was illogical to think she'd be able to hear Kirk looking for her from here, but it didn't stop her heart pounding in her chest.

Slowly, but surely, the bus drew closer and finally it was pulling up beside the stop. The shuffling gait of the elderly woman as she attempted to mount the step almost drove Eve wild. She wanted to rush forward and pick the lady up in her arms and toss her into the bus, but aside from being ridiculous and rude, it would certainly have caused a scene and probably slowed their departure. She held it together, gritting her teeth as the old woman, finally having made it onto the bus, began digging in her purse for the fare.

Every part of Eve's skin prickled with anxiety. She could almost feel harsh fingers descending on her arm, detaining her, but the old woman was shuffling towards a seat now and the teenage boy had a bus pass. Eve made her way into the bus quickly and handed the driver a ten dollar note. She might as well have punched him in the face with the look he gave her. "Correct change only," he snapped, jabbing a finger towards the sign.

"Keep the change," Eve snapped in response, diving into the depths of the bus like a woman pursued by a tiger. She glanced out the smudged windows as she sat, and to her relief saw no sign that Kirk was after her just yet. The bus began to move and the beautiful sense of relief almost brought laughter bubbling to her lips. She'd escaped!

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Hot and wet, Kirk emerged from the shower. He dried himself off briskly, wrapped one pristine white towel around his waist and draped another over his shoulders. The moment he stepped out of the bathroom, he felt something was wrong. The house felt quiet. Empty.

With a muttered curse, he went into the lounge where he'd left Evelyn. She was gone, and more disturbingly, so was her purse. With quick efficiency he checked the rest of the house. She really was gone. Damningly, the bolts on the front door had been pulled open. She'd waltzed out the door whilst he'd been showering and congratulating himself on having intimidated his dim captive into obedience.

"Idiot," he insulted himself, curling his fingers into fists.

Dressing quickly, he went out onto the street, but there was no sign of her. She'd had a full ten minutes to get away now. What if she'd flagged down a car or gone to the police? She could bring a world of trouble down on all their heads if she had. No. He couldn't think like that. He had to believe he'd find her before she went blabbing to anyone.

He went inside, straight to his computer. He needed as much information as he could get on Miss Evelyn Day and he needed it quickly. The usual sources did not reveal much, she had no criminal record, so there was no information there. Aside from her father, she had no criminal contacts at all. All he could get was a registered address. That was better than nothing. Kirk knew from experience that most people on the run usually went somewhere familiar and comforting. For Evelyn that would probably be home.

She lived on the other side of the city, near the university. She might not be going to college, but she was certainly living amongst peers that did. That worked for him. He'd pulled on a pair of blue

jeans and a crisp blue shirt when he was getting dressed and he put on a tweed jacket so that he'd probably do a decent impression of someone's father. He was only just old enough to have fathered a college aged child, but he was close enough and college kids weren't exactly known for their stellar observational skills anyway.

The drive to the other side of town was a frustratingly long one that took almost an hour. Every minute she was out of his sight was another minute in which everything could go horribly wrong. When he finally arrived in her neighborhood he parked a block away from her address, out of habit, and began walking. It was a pleasant enough neighborhood, with trees lining the streets. It was noisy though, he could hear no fewer than five stereos blaring different music at one another. The cacophony would have done his head in if he'd lived there.

Evelyn's apartment building had security in the form of a lower door that required a key code, but a thoughtful soul had propped the door open with a chair and Kirk was able to wander right on in. Her apartment was on the third floor, so he took the stairs quickly two at a time. The door to her apartment was closed and locked. He rapped on the door, but there was no reply. That meant she either wasn't there or she wasn't answering the door. It didn't really matter one way or the other, he was getting in. The lock that secured her door was almost as dismal as the level of security in the lobby of the building. He had a lock picking set in his pocket, but he didn't need it, the cheap lock gave way to a quick hard swipe of a credit card and he was in.

Her apartment was small and run down, but neatly kept. There were only two rooms, the main room which served as kitchen, lounge and bedroom and another room which functioned as a bathroom, though by the stench that was rising from the pipes, only barely. How could Phil let his daughter live like this? He had money, it made no sense that his daughter should live in a rundown apartment with mushrooms growing out of the plumbing. Evelyn wasn't there, but he'd bet money that she'd show up at some point. He locked the door up again and retired to a bucket seat that looked as if it had been salvaged from a dumpster to wait.

Keys in the door caught his attention not twenty minutes later. With soft steps, he took refuge next to the door so that he would be behind it when it was opened. Entirely unaware of the fact there was someone inside, Evelyn unlocked the door and scurried into the room, slamming the door behind her. He watched her from behind for several long seconds as she placed her purse on the crate that passed for a coffee table and took her high heels off, groaning as she rubbed her feet.

"Running in heels takes a toll, huh," Kirk observed dryly.

Evelyn shrieked in surprise and whirled around, holding one high heel in her hand, brandishing it like a weapon. "Get away from me," she demanded with entirely useless fierceness.

He raised his hands in the air. "Calm down little girl, I'm not going to hurt you."

She shot him a furious look. "Yes you are. You damned liar!"

Kirk stopped in his tracks. If he wasn't seeing her with his own eyes, if she hadn't been reacting to him with such vehement vitriol, he wouldn't have been certain that this was the woman he had escorted out of the basement of an inner city basement just a few hours earlier. She was transformed by her freedom in a way that was quite beautiful. Her cheeks were pink from excitement, her lips were parted with passion and her eyes burned with vigor. She would fight him tooth and nail, he could see it

in every line of her body and it excited him.

"I assure you I have no intention of harming you," he said, correcting himself subtly. He had come to the conclusion that he might very well hurt her, but only in the most noble of ways. Evelyn was proving herself to be spirited beyond what he had imagined, and a spirited woman could only be dealt with in a few ways. She could be appeased, which was out of the question, she could be tricked, but that would only breed mistrust, or she could be tamed, which was his preferred method.

"You've been very naughty, Miss Evelyn," he purred in low, domineering tones as he took another step towards her, closing the gap between them. Her pretty mouth fell open in a sort of surprise. Clearly she had not been expecting this reaction. She had probably expected violence and anger.

"Don't come any closer," she reiterated the request. "I'll scream!"

"Will you? What will become of your father if you scream?"

A dark look passed over her sweet features. "I don't care what becomes of him," she declared boldly.

"Really?" He smirked, not altogether surprised. A daughter used as a pawn was unlikely to harbor many warm feelings towards her progenitor. "Well what will become of you if you scream?"

"Someone will call the police, they'll arrest you," she said, drawing herself up to her full height, which was still very short indeed.

"Say they do that. Say they lock me away in the darkest cell they can find. Then what happens to you, Miss Evelyn?" Kirk remained patient, speaking with an almost paternal air.

"Then I am free of this crazy shit." The profanity sounded almost alien falling from those sweet ruby lips.

"I know you can behave better than this, you demonstrated that today," he tutted in disapproval.

She frowned, her neatly plucked brows creasing beneath the folds of her forehead. "You can't tell me how to behave," she said, befuddled by his presumption.

"Let me finish the chain of events for you," Kirk ignored her last statement. "You can perhaps have me arrested and that leaves you here, in this flimsy apartment that anyone with the slightest motivation can break into. When the Russians come for you - not if, but when, they will take you."

"My father will get them their money." She tried to put some certainty into the statement, but she failed.

"Phil had no means of pulling twenty grand together, let alone two million. It wouldn't surprise me if he's already skipped the country," Kirk said in flat, matter of fact tones. "It's only a matter of time before Vlad decides to settle his debts with you. Just how hard do you think you'll have to work to pay off twenty million?"

"Then it doesn't matter, does it? Whether you stay or whether you go, it all ends the same way, so please leave me be." She spoke stiffly, with the same closed demeanor she had used earlier in the day. Whether she believed him or not, she was no longer listening, no longer paying any real attention.

"They will not take you from me," Kirk said. "So we must go now and wait and see what happens next. Come along, don't be churlish." He held out his hand to her as he spoke in clipped, authoritative tones. She hesitated, so he reached out and took the stiletto out of her hand. "Tell you what, as we're here, why don't you pack a few things. I'll wait."

Her resistance faded in the face of his certainty. She knew that she was in danger, being taped to a chair and watching her father blubber with fear earlier today told her that. All he had to do was keep playing on that and she'd do as she was told. Hopefully. He didn't want to have to delve into graphic detail about what awaited her if the Russians decided to use her to settle her father's debt. It didn't bear thinking about.

Kirk stood by the front door and kept an eye on the hallway as she moved about the apartment, picking up little bits and pieces. She moved like a woman in a daze. "Hurry it up Evelyn," he called softly. He didn't want to tarry here. It was a completely unsecured location and the pricking of his intuition told him that he wouldn't be the only one paying the apartment a visit. Not a minute later the sound of heavy boots falling on the stairs told him that he'd been correct. "Here we go," he murmured to himself.

Before the knuckles of the ham-fisted Russians could land on the door, he opened it in their faces. It was the same pair of gentlemen who had been working Phil over earlier that day. They weren't the sharpest tools in the shed, but they clearly knew their trade of intimidation well enough.

"Hello," Kirk ground out. "To what do I owe the honor?" He was always polite when dealing with these people. Always. It didn't matter whether they were meeting on friendly terms or whether it was an awkward moment like this, a moment that had the potential to turn suddenly violent.

"Who's that?" Evelyn's voice came from behind him.

"Just a couple of visitors, finish getting ready darling." He allowed himself the overly familiar term because it gave him an air of possession. They weren't just coming for Phil's girl, they were coming for his girl and if they wanted her, they had to go through him first. All of this information was conveyed in that short sentence and the hard look that accompanied it.

"Mr., Vlad wants the girl," the taller of the henchmen announced in flat tones. Nature had blessed him with striking blue eyes, but that was where her endowments had ended, or that was all that was left of them anyway. The man's nose was crooked from having been broken on several occasions, his ears were both swollen and cauliflowered from blows to the head, and his skin was pockmarked and lined with scars. This was not a man to cross lightly. This was a man who knew what it was to fight for his life and win.

"We agreed on a week. It has barely been three hours," Kirk reminded him. "She is mine for the present."

Hard blue eyes bored into his own and for a second that seemed to hang for eternity, life and death was weighed in those eyes. If Kirk had shown even the slightest weakness, if his gaze had

wavered for a second, if he had tried to appease them with a supplicating smile, they would have pushed him aside and taken her. Had he tried to stop them, a lethal combat would have ensued.

“Very well,” the Russian said, his accent thick. “We will contact you within the week. But eh,” his cold eyes flickered over Kirk's shoulder to where Evelyn stood in the center of her apartment, clutching a jacket to her breast. She had very quickly worked out what was going on and had taken refuge in silence. “Do not touch her, eh comrade. Vlad wants her pure.”

The assumption that she was pure was something of a stretch, Kirk thought. He did not reply, not deigning to acknowledge the warning and the threat behind it. Vlad considered Evelyn his already. He would abide by the terms of the agreement, as far as they could be enforced, but he wanted her.

The Russians turned and walked away, leaving Kirk with bile rising in his throat. The casual way they talked about human flesh was indicative of their many crimes against decency, against humanity. To them a woman was a commodity to be traded, her mind and wishes secondary to the desires of the male.

He shut the door and turned to Evelyn, who had gone pale with fear. Good. She needed to be afraid. “We're leaving.” This time, there was no resistance, she gathered her few belongings mutely and when he indicated that she should, she took his hand and allowed him to lead her down to his car as mildly as a lamb.

Chapter Three

"You will never set foot outside that door without my permission, you understand?" Kirk's expression was severe and Eve shied away from him, taking refuge by the arm of the couch she was sitting on as he paced back and forth in front of her. The curtains had been drawn closed tightly all around the house and all the windows and doors were bolted. He was concerned, that much was obvious. She didn't need him to tell her that, she could see it in the tense planes of his face, in the rigid way he held his shoulders. He was in a heightened state of alertness and had been since the Russians had paid their little visit to her apartment.

The entire long and complicated drive back to his home had been conducted in a heavy silence she'd found almost intolerable. Her composure was on the edge of deserting her completely. She'd finally come to understand that this wasn't a matter of her father's that could be avoided by returning to her life. This was a matter of hers. They wanted her.

"Why?" She whispered the question to herself.

"Why?" Kirk rounded on her, looming over her. "Because I tell you so."

She uttered a cry of surprise and fear at his sudden and angry reaction. "No, I was wondering why they want me so badly," she explained, her voice a soft whimper.

"Oh," his posture relaxed slightly. "Vlad is a rich man. He is accustomed to getting what he wants. The fact that you're difficult to get is probably whetting his appetite all the more," Kirk speculated.

"I don't want him to have me," Eve said softly.

"Well you're not helping your situation by running out of the house the moment my back is turned," he lectured her. "You will suffer the consequences for that, young lady."

"What are they?" Her lip curled. "What could you possibly do to me that's worse than what the Russians will do?"

He shook his head at her, his hands clenching and unclenching by his side. His frustration was a palpable force. "I don't want to hurt you. I want you to do as you're told."

"I will," she promised.

His response to her facile promise was a low growl. "No, you won't. I've seen how you behave Evelyn, you pretend to go along with what I say, and the moment my back is turned you do whatever you were planning to do in the first place."

Her smirk was hard to hide. She'd gotten him good on their first go round. He'd taken her for some dim bimbo and she'd proved otherwise. But it was his turn to surprise her and prove a point. "I'm going to spank you," he said suddenly, as if he'd just snapped to a decision.

All she could do was stare at him, her mouth open in surprise. "No you're not," she shook her

head emphatically. "I might not be as old as you, but I'm not a child for you to discipline."

"Incorrect," he snapped. "You're in my care and you're under my roof. I want you to have something to remember next time you decide you know what's best."

"I do have something to remember. The Russians!"

"They didn't dissuade you in the morning, why should they dissuade you now?" He sat down next to her and began unbuttoning the cuffs of his sleeves. She watched with stunned horror as he rolled his shirt sleeves up, exposing powerful forearms covered with thick, dark hair. "Over you go," he said, patting his knee.

"No, you can't be serious," Eve shook her head and shrank away.

"I saw the look in your eye when I found you in that apartment, Evelyn. I saw how proud of yourself you were at the idea you'd gotten away with disobeying me. You need to learn that there are consequences for crossing me." He spoke in even, measured tones, holding her attention with his slate gray eyes.

"But this... this is ridiculous," she spluttered. "This is what you do to children when they misbehave."

"And to grown women when they behave like willful brats," Kirk nodded, taking her by the wrist. "Come along, time to go over my lap."

"No!" She tried to resist, but she did not have the strength to do so. He was so much larger than her. So much more powerful. He managed to wrangle her over his lap in one smooth movement, settling her over his hard thighs.

"Don't worry, little Evelyn," he purred. "If it is such a childish punishment then a big girl like you should be able to take it without any trouble at all."

She was not afforded an opportunity to argue the validity of the point he'd made, for he immediately began slapping his open palm across her bottom. The skirt she wore offered far less protection than she'd imagined, and the slapping hurt much more than she thought it would. Each slap stung her cheeks, making her buck her hips in a way that made her blush with its lewd overtones. He had her firmly in his power and he was making sure that she knew it.

"I don't like being played with, Evelyn," he lectured her as his hand fell in a rhythmic tattoo against her bottom. "You will always be honest with me, and that means telling me what you really think and feel, not hiding your intentions behind a pretty facade of cooperation."

"Okay, I want you to stop hitting me!" Eve gasped, grasping at the leg of his suit trousers as his palm smacked her bottom with an especially hard blow that jolted her forward into his thighs.

"I bet you do," Kirk said grimly. "But you earned this, little girl. You disobeyed me and you thought you'd get away with it. Well in this house there are consequences. In this house, you obey me." He was hammering the point home both in word and deed as he picked up the pace of the spanking, giving her no chance to reply in between her squeals of pain.

Eve was mortified. She'd never been subject to this kind of discipline before. Indeed discipline had always been lacking in her life. What little self-discipline she'd managed to scrape together had been funneled into her native talents of trickery and subterfuge. The fact that Kirk saw through her demure act and addressed her behavior rather than her portrayal of her behavior was most disturbing to her.

He did not spank her for very long, in fact only thirty or so swats landed on her bottom, but his point had been made. He was a ruler absolute. When she was finally permitted to scramble free, her face was flushed, her hair mussed and falling into her eyes. She tried to right herself, to regain her lost dignity, but no matter how much she smoothed her hair and straightened her skirt, it wasn't possible. He'd done something irrevocable. He'd held her down and shown her that he truly was in control. Games and disobedience would not dissuade him; they would only make him more determined.

Kirk sat very still on the couch. He had not yet moved from the position he'd spanked her in. His legs were spread shoulder width apart and the arm that had delivered the stinging blows to her backside now rested by his side. He was looking at her with a cool, clear gaze, a slight smile glimmering on his lips as he waited for her to react.

She had a choice. She could throw the tantrum that was rising steadily in her breast, fueled by a sense of outrage and unfairness. She could apologize for her behavior. Or she could pretend that what had happened had in fact not happened. That was the path she chose. Oh he was strong and virile and he could thrash her if he chose, but she did not have to acknowledge it. Her hand moved away from her stinging bottom as she composed herself and moved to sit gingerly in the soft arm chair furthest away from him. She did not speak; she did not trust her voice to be as steady as she wished it to be.

A rumbling sound started from the couch. He was laughing. He was laughing at her. "Oh Evelyn, you are a prize," he said.

"You are a filthy criminal," she bit out in harsh response. His laughter died on his lips. So the truth hurt him, did it? Kirk obviously liked to think of himself as one of the good guys, but the good guys did not come down into dark basements, and threaten helpless old men, and take their daughters as deposits on bad debts. She made no effort to hide the derision on her normally sweet face, but when he stood up swiftly she was forced to choke down a cry of fear.

"Yes Evelyn, yes I am," he purred, stooping next to her. "So be careful what you say, pretty one." Menace rolled off him and she could no longer hide her fear as she recoiled into the depths of the chair. The look in his eyes was entirely cold. Gone was the amusement at her reaction to being spanked, and gone too was the anger that had proceeded the spanking. There was nothing there now, nothing at all. A mercury cold shiver trickled down her spine as she realized that Kirk, if that was his name, was one of those men capable of anything, anything at all. She was not the only one who had been playing a fine game of pretend. His smiles and his friendly glances had been but a facade. She was now seeing his true nature, and his true nature was a void of terrible possibility.

Just when she thought she might scream from fear, he winked and his expression was transformed. He looked just like a normal man again, an everyday man. The chill did not leave her bones as he stood up and walked into the kitchen.

"Are you hungry yet, little one?" His deep timbre rolled from the other room. A perfectly

ordinary question from a singular man unlike any she'd ever known before.

She was hungry. She was starving in fact. "A little," she admitted in a voice that trembled. "Sir," she added as an afterthought. She wanted to appease him desperately; she had the certain sense that being on his bad side would not be pleasant, and she'd felt herself slipping to that dark place when he'd looked at her with those cold eyes. She did not want to go back there. The Russians with their harsh words and harsher hands had not put that primal fear in her nearly as effectively as he had done with one look.

Eve heard him moving about in the kitchen making comforting domestic sounds. She kicked her shoes off and drew her knees up to her chin, wrapping her arms around them as she took refuge in the fetal position. It had been a long day, a long day of bad decisions and worse consequences. If only she'd ignored the call this morning. If only she'd resisted the lure of easy money. She should have known her father would never help her.

She was vulnerable and exposed. Kirk was offering her protection until the end of the week, but what then? Would he simply hand her over to the Russians then? He had certainly agreed to if her father didn't pay. Lost in worry, she began to twirl a silky strand of hair around her finger. She couldn't trust anyone and nowhere was safe. The best thing to do would be to escape, run away to another city, but her bank account only had fifty dollars in it and that wasn't going to get her far.

When Kirk returned with two plates of chicken salad, she was still worried. He handed her a plate and she looked at it as if she'd never seen food before and didn't know what to do with it. "Eat," he told her. "It will help." He sat down and turned on the television, the inane blather washing around them as they ate in silence.

The food was good, she discovered. Though she picked at it suspiciously at first, the chicken had been seasoned nicely, and was still hot from the pan. He'd tossed a few sautéed mushrooms, mixed them in with the lettuce and applied a thick dressing that brought the meal together. As she filled her belly, she began to feel slightly better about things. Not a whole lot better, but slightly better. The depression that had been settling over her as she sat alone had lifted slightly by the time she cleared her plate.

"You should get some sleep," Kirk said when she yawned a few minutes later. "Come on." He stood up and walked down the hall that lead out of the lounge, the hall she'd not been down before. At the end of the hall was a bedroom, furnished in the same clean and comfortable style that typified the rest of the house. The center of the room was a fairly large bed covered with a cream quilted duvet and topped with thick pillows that looked very comfortable indeed. "There's a shower, through there," Kurt pointed towards a door that stood slightly ajar.

"Thanks," Eve said in a whisper soft voice. "Where do you sleep?"

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Usually I sleep here; tonight I'll be keeping watch. I'll wake you when it's your turn, soldier." Eve giggled softly at being called a soldier. He smiled when he heard her laughter, gave her another one of those charming winks and left her to her own devices.

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Kirk looked in on Evelyn thirty minutes later and discovered that she was obediently curled up

in bed. She must have been completely exhausted, poor thing. There was a sweet scent in the room, the light feminine smell of a woman. It had been a long time since a woman had lain in his bed, since his home had smelled so light and pretty. She was already asleep, her breath was deep and slow and she barely stirred when he pulled the coverlet up so that she would be warm.

Satisfied that his reluctant guest had been taken care of, Kirk made his way to the small office that lead off from the lounge. There he picked up a phone that at first appeared to be dead. It wasn't until he pressed a sequence of numbers that he got an open line.

“Command and Control.” The operator's voice was brisk, business like.

“Kirk here. I need a meeting with Command. Tonight. Things have changed.”

There was a long moment of silence in which the faint clattering of keys could be heard in the background. “Your request is approved. Hold the line.”

Kirk sat down heavily, the phone clutched tightly in his powerful hand. He had one chance now to convince his handlers that they needed to move quickly.

A grunting came over the line. The Commander sounded irritable, as if he'd rather be in pajamas and drinking a hot chocolate than talking to a field operative. He was old now, past his operational prime but they didn't keep him around for his physical abilities, they kept him around for the mind that had navigated the Cold War with precision. The Commander played with people like other men played with chess pieces. You never knew what part you played in his plan, sometimes you were the king, sometimes you were the pawn to be sacrificed. The Commander had no loyalty to any man, his loyalty lay with the state, with the overarching principles he'd sword to protect long ago. He expected the same type of loyalty from his men.

“What is so important, Kirk?”

Kirk cut to the heart of the matter. “This deal is going sour. Phil isn't going to pay. He's traded his daughter to the Russians instead. I have her now as collateral.”

“How do you know he isn't going to pay?”

“How can he? The federal government keep hitting the shipments. There's a bubble in the supply line and its going to hit him first. It's time to make an arrest.”

The pause was brief, too brief. Kirk knew before the Commander spoke that his request would be denied. “We don't want Philip Day. He's small time, nothing. We want Vladimir Flerko. Without a trade, there's no evidence. Without evidence, there's no charge.”

“Without an arrest, I'm going to have to hand over a nineteen year old girl to the Russians,” Kirk explained.

There was a brief sigh, a sigh that seemed to bemoan the sentimentality of the modern agent. “Sometimes collateral damage is unavoidable.”

Kirk's eyes hardened as he stared at the wall in front of him. “She's innocent.”

“That's unfortunate,” the Commander replied, his tone devoid of emotion. He didn't care about the fate of an unknown woman. In his lifetime he'd seen thousands sacrificed for the political machine. What was one more soul in the grand scheme of things? “Is that all?”

“Yes sir,” Kirk tried to hide the disappointment and frustration in his voice.

“Stay the course, operative,” the Commander ordered. The line went dead as the call was disconnected.

Kirk sat back in his chair and tried to take stock of the situation. He hadn't joined the force to make innocents suffer. But the Commander wasn't going to give Evelyn safe haven and in less than a week, he would have to hand her over to the Russians, unless Phil paid up.

He'd told Evelyn that his name was Kirk and indeed it was, but his underworld clients knew him by another title, 'Ender'. That was why he'd been called down to the basement, to ply his trade, to rid the Russians of a weak link in their chain in a way that would serve as warning to others thinking of crossing them. His reputation for killing, with flair that left his enemies quaking, was the reason they'd employed him. Any idiot could pull the trigger on a gun. It took a true artist to tease death out of a body. That talent had landed him on death row a decade earlier, before Command had taken an interest in the bitter young man and offered him a second chance at life.

He was an agent for Command, but in his current cover he was working as a mercenary for private cartels, anyone with enough money to pay him for his services. He did whatever they wanted him to do, assuming the price was right. He'd done terrible things, things that haunted him many nights, faces rising up from the darkness of his mind to taunt him. Most could be sneered at, even gloated over. How do you live with yourself when you're a killer? You kill those who need killing. You tell yourself that you're acting in the service of a greater good. Most of the time he could believe that, but tonight he could not.

His mind drifted back to the sweet faced innocent sleeping in his bed. If there was good in the world, it was in her. She was beautiful and she was sweet and she was brave. The thought of Vlad's stained, old fingers on her body made his stomach turn, and the knowledge that Vlad's touch would be the beginning of a sadistic game of sexual torture that would go on and on, and possibly not end for years, made his blood burn. Whatever impulse draws a man to protect a woman at the cost of his own life had taken Kirk strongly in its maddening embrace. Commander be damned, he would die before he saw harm come to that girl.

Chapter Four

Eve stretched out between soft sheets and sighed. Soft sunlight was leaking through the curtains and she was filled with a peaceful sense of calm that dissipated the moment she realized where she was. The brief amnesia of morning passed all too quickly and her mind was quickly assailed with memories of laughing gangsters pressing her into a chair and taping her there harshly, and the man with eyes like death who had taken her from them. She swung herself out of bed and dressed quickly, not knowing what this day would bring.

Kirk was waiting for her in the kitchen with fresh coffee brewed. His smile was warm and welcoming, so much so that she had trouble remembering how terrible his expression could be when the warmth drained from his face. "Hello my dear," he purred, pouring a fresh cup. "Did you sleep well?"

"I did," she said, taking the cup he offered her gratefully.

"Good." He seemed genuinely pleased that she'd had a restful evening. She looked at him cautiously as she raised the cup to her lips. He met her gaze evenly and openly, letting her stare. This man was something of a mystery. She tried to gauge his age and decided that he was in his thirties at least. Objectively she knew that wasn't all that old, but he seemed much older than her and worldly and wise in ways she couldn't begin to imagine. He was always vital and alert, filled with energy that flowed around him, changing according to his moods. As he looked at her, his gaze was troubled. Though he tried to make his expression inscrutable, she could feel his concern.

"What are you going to do with me?" There. It was the question she had avoided asking. The twenty million dollar question that stomped around them like an elephant in the room. "I mean, when the week is up, when my father defaults on his payment."

"That is a very good question, Evelyn," he replied softly.

"Are you going to hand me over to them?"

He looked at her with those darkly rimmed gray eyes, eyes that had seen so much. She could feel the weight of his gaze like a tangible thing. "No," he said finally.

Could she believe him? Even if he intended to hand her over he surely wouldn't say that, it would make her so much harder to control. Then again, if all he desired was control he could keep her tied up and locked away until the deadline passed. She realized with a jolt that he was actually going out of his way to be kind to her.

"Thank you," she said gratefully. The relief she felt hearing his answer was quickly followed by new fear however. The Russians would come after them both if he didn't hand her over. She knew that. They had come for her even before the deadline. Vlad wanted her badly indeed. A tremor passed through her as she remembered the one time she had met the man who was going to great lengths to take her. A month ago she had made the mistake of accepting her father's dinner invitation. It was at a nice restaurant and the silly part of her brain that wanted him to love her had convinced her that this was his way of reaching out. Perhaps they would reconcile.

But they had not been alone at the restaurant. There had been a third party at the table, an old man with wispy white hair and bloodshot eyes. His hands had been clawed with arthritis and in spite of the expensive suit and fur coat he'd worn, or perhaps because of them, he looked less like a man and more like a slaving, feral animal consumed with lust when he looked at her. She looked like his first wife, he'd rasped, pointing at her with the wrinkled claw of his hand. He could still remember how his first wife felt, how she tasted.

The blatant lechery had made Eve sick to her stomach. She'd made excuses to leave and made a quick exit which had angered her father. He'd called her later that night to thunder at her, to berate her for being a selfish, spoiled, whore of a daughter. She'd not understood his rage then, she'd been far too hurt by his words to understand what had really happened. Her own father had been offering her to the old man as a form of payment for something and the old man had liked what he'd seen. Now, father or no father he wanted her.

"Cheer up, it hasn't happened yet," Kirk drawled, breaking her reverie.

She looked up, her eyes moist with tears of hurt. "I'm sorry," she apologized quickly, though she did not really know what she was apologizing for.

His smile was as masterful as it was reassuring. "If I do not wish for them to take you, they will not take you," he declared. The words were boastful, but the tone he delivered them in was not. He spoke as if he were speaking a simple truth, as if the words themselves could be etched in stone.

"Don't get too cocky," she muttered, remembering the men Vlad had sent. They were rough, terrible men who enjoyed her fear, and had seemed to feed on even the small pain and discomfort inflicted on her when they taped her to the chair. She'd wondered if she were about to die, until the clean cut stranger with the commanding presence entered the room. The stranger who had turned out to be her unlikely savior, who even now protected her in the sanctum of his home.

A short laugh echoed around the kitchen. "Oh kitten, you do not know me well yet," Kirk said. "Soon you will learn never to doubt what I tell you." His laughter floated away as his expression grew serious once more. "But first, we have work to do."

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Kirk had a week to prepare for the shit storm that would await them when Vlad realized he was not getting his money or the woman. He had less time to prepare for the consequences of the extreme disobedience he intended to enact against the Commander. The Commander especially would not like what Kirk was about to do, not in the slightest.

Mulling his options over in his mind, Kirk watched his now willing captive as she drank her coffee in short sips. She was so delicate, a perfect flower. Could she do what she needed to do to survive? Yes. She'd had no qualms about threatening him with his own weapon. He could have punished her for that, but he had not. Even then he'd had an inkling that the harder side of her needed to be nurtured. He would punish her for disobedience, but for having nerve? Never.

"Listen Evelyn," he began.

She cut him off with a wave of her hand. "Eve, please. Only my father calls me Evelyn."

"Eve," he nodded. "Things could get worse before they get better. You're going to have to be strong."

A spark of interest danced in her eyes. She had sensed that there was a plan. "What are we going to do?"

There was no point sitting around waiting for the Russians to find them. There was no point in staying here where his handlers knew how to find him. They had a few days up their sleeves and they had to make them count. He grinned wickedly, brimming with the daring of this new adventure which would put him at odds with both the lawful world and the underworld. "We're getting a six day head start."

The announcement was the beginning of a flurry of activity. Kirk was a master of the quick exit and most of the things he needed were close at hand. Eve only had a handful of possessions in the first place and within the hour they were on the road with a bunch of cash he kept stashed away for a rainy day and all the fire power he could put his hands on.

Eve was quiet when they got on the road. He wondered if she was perhaps regretting putting her trust in him. She was probably just scared, he reasoned. She had good reason to be scared. He couldn't blame her. "It's going to be fine," he reassured her, reaching across and squeezing her hand.

She looked across at him, her brown eyes filled with a sudden mistrust. "Why are you helping me?" The question was sudden, direct. He sighed with the weight of it. There were a lot of reasons why he was helping her. Some of them came from a place of chivalry, others didn't. All he really knew is that the idea of seeing Evelyn taken by the Russians, knowing what awaited her made his stomach churn. He removed his hand from hers and returned it to the steering wheel.

"I've done a lot of bad things in my life, Eve. If there's a hell, I'm going there." She nodded, seeming to believe him without question. "There's a lot I'll do for the right price, but turning a kid over to the Russians because her father is a fool isn't one of them."

"You think of me like a kid?" The pout on her sweet lips made him chuckle. Here she was, being pursued because her body had caught the eye of a gangster and yet she still wanted reassurance she was attractive to him. Women, even the best of them had a streak of vanity. "I'm not a child," she asserted crossing her arms over her chest as they whizzed through the open countryside, sitting right at the speed limit so as not to attract the attention of the authorities.

"No, you're not," he agreed.

"So why call me one?"

He shrugged. "Because you're not far off being one. You're nineteen, at the beginning of life. You could do anything, be anything. I've made my choices, your father made his choices, but you haven't made yours yet. That makes you something of a kid."

Her dark eyes flashed at him with some deep emotion, but he didn't consider it too deeply. He was more concerned with pulling off the road and changing the plates on the car. The electronic tracker installed by his handlers had already been ripped out and put on Mrs Kransowsky's Oldsmobile. The

government could track that until the cows came home for all he cared.

Crouching behind the car and working on the screws of the license plate, Kirk considered his position. For five years he'd been a loyal agent, but if the Commander was going to push him into vile acts, then it was no different from any of the unofficial criminal positions he'd held as a younger man. He did not know what would happen when the agency realized he'd gone into hiding, but he was sure it wouldn't be good. Oh well. Resigning himself to whatever fate held for him, he screwed the last screws into the new plates, wiped his hands off, tossed the old plates into the trunk and got back into the car.

The sight that greeted him when he got back in was an interesting one. Eve had been wearing a knee length denim skirt, quite demure and non-descript, just like he'd told her to dress. As he put his seat belt on, he happened to glance over and see that her skirt had managed to ride halfway up her thighs. A query rose to his lips, but he didn't want to offend her, so he simply started the car and drove out of the rest stop back onto the open road.

As they hit tar seal, Eve huffed moodily and pushed her skirt back down. She was mad about something. Had she deliberately pulled her skirt up to display her pale, curved thighs? Was she trying to seduce him in some adorably inept sort of way? He didn't know whether to be turned on or amused and quickly discovered that he was both.

Eve's mood continued to deteriorate as they drove. She became sulkier and sulkier. It made little sense to Kirk, but he knew he would have to address it sooner or later. Fortunately he'd made reservations for the evening at a little motel in the middle of the countryside, a location that would be difficult for either law enforcement or law breakers to sneak up on without being noticed. The moment they walked into the little room that would shelter them for the evening, the drama began.

"It's gross here." Eve wrinkled her nose as she looked about with sneering derision. He knew she didn't mean that, it wasn't the most palatial of places, but it was a damn sight nicer than her apartment. "Do we have to stay here?"

"Yes," Kirk said, putting his bag down next to the rickety old stand that held a television. Before Eve could open her mouth again, he took her by the upper arm and sat on the hard bed, pulling her over his knee before she knew what was happening.

"What are you doing?" She squealed angrily, wriggling around like a fish out of water.

"I'm addressing your behavior, young lady," he said, his voice a deep rumble as he swept up the skirt she'd been so very keen to raise for him earlier.

"I haven't done anything wrong!"

"You've been sulking since we stopped to change the plates," he disagreed, landing a hard swat on her bottom. "I don't tolerate sulking, Eve. I don't tolerate games either."

"What games?" She was feigning innocence and that little game cost her five hard slaps to each of her cheeks, five swats given with disciplinary ardor that painted the skin outside her panties red.

"I said I don't tolerate games," he growled. Reaching between her legs momentarily he placed his palm under her pubic bone and shifted her into a better position for spanking. The movement

flattened his hand across her soft mound and this time when she squealed it was not in pain, but in surprise. "If you want something, you tell me, understand?"

"Okay, okay," she wailed, giving in quickly. "I'm sorry!" Clearly Miss Eve did not enjoy being spanked. He did not blame her, he knew very well that his palm fell with a force that could make grown men stumble. That energy unleashed on her pale cheeks was nothing to be sneered at.

He kept her over his lap. It was the best place for this conversation, it reminded her of her place, reminded her not to play games. "What were you playing at today?"

"I wanted you to notice me," she mumbled the confession at the carpet.

He choked out a short laugh. "Notice you? Little girl I am risking my neck for you. I think I notice you."

"As a woman, I mean," she said, her cheeks blushing as she spoke softly.

He knew what was happening. She was bonding with him, more than that, she was imprinting on him. She was a young lady naive to much of the world and though she had seen much in the past days, she didn't know enough to be truly scared. Instead of making her quiver and hide, the danger was arousing her. Even as he held her there with the threat of more spanking implicit in her position, her hips were shifting in a muted rhythm that invited his hand back down between her thighs. She wanted him and he didn't think he could resist her. Didn't know if he wanted to. "You're playing a very dangerous game," he purred, allowing himself to caress her bottom.

"I don't care," she moaned breathlessly.

He peeled her panties away from her bottom and spied the sweet treasure nestled between her thighs. Almost reverently, he ran a finger over the lightly furred slit, feeling his erection grow in response to her breathy moan. She wanted it. She wanted it badly. She was like a young cat in heat, eager to mate, eager to welcome him inside. With a tender touch he caressed her, caught up in the beauty of her body.

She arched up to him, silently begging him to enter her, begging him to take her. Her whole body was burning with need, from her fingers that clutched at the bleached bedspread and his pants to her quivering thighs. Gently he slipped a finger inside her, stroking inside her tight passage. Her reaction was priceless, she moaned a throaty moan and thrust her hips up with sudden violence. He found his finger sliding in deeper, then stopping at a thin barrier. "You're a virgin."

She looked at him for the first time, turning her head and looking over her shoulder. "Yes," she admitted, squirming her hips back towards him, wanting more of his touch. He smiled and leaned down, dropping a kiss on her cheek as he withdrew his finger and focused his attentions around the outer regions of her womanhood. She was no less appreciative of this touch that skimmed around her clit and massaged just above the hood.

Lost in the wanton grip of pleasure, she worked her hips against his hand, letting out little cries of pleasure as he expertly caressed the folds of her moist pussy. His need was growing too, his cock strained against his pants, demanding to be set free.

If she wanted to be treated like a woman, wanted to tease and seduce, she'd get what she asked for. She whimpered in soft complaint when he slid her off his lap onto the floor between his legs, but not for long. Before she could ask what she was doing there, he'd freed his erect cock and guided her sweet mouth to it. Her lips parted willingly as he curled his fingers in her hair and brought her head down. "Oh god," he groaned as his thickness slid into her silky mouth. So began an evening of mutual exploration and pleasure. He did not take her virginity. The shabby motel was not the place for such an event, but there was no harm in taking pleasure in one another's bodies and they did so until they lay exhausted in one another's arms.

He remained awake for some time as she slept sheltered in the curve of his body, the bare flesh of her behind pressed against his crotch. He could have taken her roughly, stripped her virginity away with passionate thrusts, but she trusted him implicitly, trusted him with her maidenhead and with her very life. The gift of her trust, given without fanfare or remark was more precious to him than all the millions in the world.

Running from the Russians and running from the law was the foolhardiest thing he'd yet done in his life. The odds of survival were low, of successfully finding a way to get the Russians off his tail and appease the Commander were even lower, but he was certain as he held Evelyn in his arms, feeling her bosom rising and falling with her soft breath that this was also the best thing he had ever done. There was more than love and lust in her touch, there was the promise of redemption, and he would not let that go without a fight.

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Five days. Five days until the Russians came after them. Five days to explore this man's body. Eve could have purred with happiness when she woke up still held tightly in Kirk's embrace. She wriggled, feeling the hard planes of his body pressed against her curves. His body was just as sexy as she'd imagined it would be. He had a rock hard stomach and powerful hips that she knew would thrust his manhood inside her wonderfully if only he weren't too much of a gentleman to do so. She had been disappointed by his refusal to take her, but she understood the romantic impulse that had made him refuse her breathless requests. It would have been charming if she hadn't burned so desperately with desire for him.

She whined when he stirred, dropped a kiss on her forehead and slid away from her to put some black underwear on. The fabric clung to his hips, obscuring his manhood, but showing the rest of his lean body to perfection. Everywhere she looked there was another muscle, not bulging obscenely like a body builder's, but naturally marked by the shadows thrown by the single bare light bulb that lit the room.

"We have to get going," he said, his demeanor business-like as he reached for his pants.

"Why?" She pouted, pushing her lower lip out to almost comical effect. "I want more."

"I'm sure you do," he grinned and reached out to fetch her bottom a hard slap that left pink fingerprints emblazoned across her flesh. "You will have more later."

"No, now! It was a squealed demand, not a request.

Kirk smiled and crawled up the bed towards her, his pants on, but still unbuttoned. She giggled

as he covered her body with his own and nipped her neck then growled in her ear. "Listen, you horny little brat, are you going to do as I say, or am I going to have to spank your bare ass red?"

"No!" She squealed and squirmed, feeling the sting of his palm all too well. "I just don't see why we're in such a hurry," she watched him slide back down and resume his dressing.

"Well my dear," he said, slipping a black leather belt through the loops on his pants. "We don't just have the Russians on our tail."

"Really?" She frowned in confusion. "Who else?"

"I don't think my employer will be happy with what I've done either. He might terminate my contract. Unfortunately the termination of the contract usually means the termination of the employee as well."

Eve clapped her hands over her mouth. He was risking both life and livelihood to save her. "I'm so sorry!"

"Don't be sorry, it was my decision," he shrugged.

"They're all trying to get us," she breathed through her hands. She didn't know who the 'all' was, but she knew very well that whoever employed a man like Kirk had to be very powerful indeed.

"Yes," Kirk said with a devil may care grin. "They are rather." He slipped his suit jacket over his shoulders and stood there, fully dressed and perfectly groomed aside from the five o'clock shadow that graced his jaw. He seemed almost otherworldly in that moment, untouched by the heavy cares that had to be weighing on him. An ordinary man would have been crushed under the pressure, but he seemed thrilled by it.

He smiled at her, the skin around his eyes crinkling with real warmth. She had seen the void where his soul should be many times, but now she saw something new in those granite eyes. Hope. She rose from the bed stark naked and placed her hand in his, wordlessly pledging herself to him. There were no words to express her gratitude, the implicit trust that would see her follow him to the ends of the earth and beyond if he deemed it necessary.

She was his, his to have, his to hold, his to take at the time of his choosing. Kirk's strong arms encircled her, brushing the fine fabric of his expensive suit against her soft skin as he reached down, cupping one pink cheek and pulling her against the hard ridge of his cock. She moaned with pleasure denied. "Go get dressed if you want to live long enough to have your desires sated," his amused voice rumbled above her as he dealt a light slap to her bottom.

She laughed and obeyed him, scurrying to the little bag she had packed, the little bag that represented all her worldly possessions. What choice did she have but to obey? He had mastered her completely and filled her tender body with a lust that drove all other thoughts, even those of danger and death out of her mind. As she knelt to find clothing, she could feel him above her, his presence protecting her, sheltering her from the ill in the world. She hoped that it would always be this way. He above her, commanding and in control, she bending to obey, burning for him with a desire that would never be quenched.

To be continued in Cry Assassin, Book Two