

True Mercy

By Idelle Kursman

Prologue

The man, Sergei Moskey, nearly passed out right on top of Marina. The reek from his sweaty, oily body could not repel her; since being taken into captivity she was now beyond revulsion. After months on this voyage, she had become inured to any foul odor.

Despite the darkness, Marina Dobrin could see his glazed eyes looking over her body as she lay chained to a hard, flat rectangular surface that served as a bed. The man had pushed the needle only halfway into her arm when he slumped forward, unconscious. Marina could see the veins in her arms and legs. She was waiting to whittle away and be no more than a mere skeleton.

The door opened slightly.

“Sergei . . . Sergei, where the hell are you?” an impatient voice hissed insistently.

The girl chained to Marina’s right moaned. Earlier, she had moaned hopelessly for hours. Marina wasn’t sure what Slavic language she was speaking, but she could no longer stand listening to the cries pelting her right ear.

Finally, Marina shouted, “Stop! Stop! Shut up! Stop!” She didn’t know if the girl spoke Ukrainian or Polish or something else. She just knew she couldn’t listen to that sound anymore.

The girl’s chain rattled a moment and then all was silent. Marina had heard the girls praying in their various languages for the duration of the journey. She herself had no religious upbringing, but it seemed as if their God remained steadfastly indifferent to their suffering.

The man named Sergei attempted to rouse himself but to no avail; he was struggling not to fall off of her. He finally fell to the ground. Someone would come to fetch him for sure, so she ignored the sharp

pain while she worked on taking the needle out of her arm before one of her other captors noticed she did not get her drug injection.

“Sergei, where are you? Are you stoned or fooling around?” the man whispered again, banging on the door. He was in such a rage he could barely get the words out.

With little room to move while she was chained to her bed, Marina managed to pull the needle out of her arm, struggling to keep it steady and straight so as not to stick herself. Fortunately, she had just enough freedom of movement to place it under her dirty sheet as her other captor swung the door open so hard it rattled like a heavy drum. He waved his flashlight. The girls who had been crammed into the room months earlier turned away to shield their eyes. Many let out a gasp or rocked in their beds. The only one who didn’t was the girl chained to Marina’s left. She had been lying in the same position for a few hours now; her mouth was open and Marina hadn’t heard her breathing. Marina inwardly mourned her, knowing that she would never taste freedom again in this world.

The other man kicked Sergei on his back.

“Owww . . . Wha . . . what are you doing, Igor?” Sergei snapped awake at the pain of the heavy boot ramming into his body.

Igor Agapov looked over at Marina and made a face as if he had tasted something rotten. He took out his small bottle of vodka and finished it off. Igor always had a small bottle on him and would often take a sip when he got frustrated. Whenever he spoke, his stale breath permeated the air.

“I can’t wait to finish her off. But all in good time,” he muttered, staring at her, instinctively touching the scar along the side of his face. He turned to Sergei and snarled in a menacing undertone, “But I have to deal with this idiot first or I’ll never get to sleep tonight.” Igor jerked him up by the rim of his shirt.

“It’s late! We’ve got to get out of here and lock the door! I need to go to bed! The ship will be docked soon and we have to get up in a few hours,” he bellowed, his spittle touching Marina’s hand. She twitched slightly, praying he didn’t see her move.

She lay with her eyes closed and her jaw slackened, fearing he would check to make sure she had her injection.

But he was too busy slapping Sergei around.

“All right! All right! Stop! Calm down! I’ll lock up and we go to bed,” Sergei said, protecting his head from the blows, and opening and closing his eyes in an attempt to get his wits about him.

Igor stormed out. Sergei followed. Marina peeked as the door closed. But when it did close, the key did not swing in the lock. Marina expected to hear Sergei fiddling with the key to lock the door shut, but he took his key out and took off instead.

She heard the engine slowing down, figuring the ship was moving toward shore. Amid the roar of the splashing waves, she noticed the moon shone like a glowing lantern in the air through a small porthole window. She shuddered, recalling the last time Igor had said the ship was docked, he meant they would be unloading the girls. Marina refused to allow her mind to think about the horrors that awaited them.

She had become so thin she was able to slip out of her chains. Marina waited until she was confident her captors were sleeping. Earlier in the day she had overheard them talking about all the work they would have to do soon. Since then she wondered where they were and how the girls would be tortured. She pictured a dark, dirty place far from where anyone could hear their cries.

Marina strained her ears to hear the approaching footsteps or smell the stale whiskey of the night guard. Nothing.

Is this my chance? She asked herself. Images of Igor’s steely eyed look of pure hatred assailed her. If she didn’t escape now, any day he would wreak a terrible vengeance on her for scarring him with his own knife. She could tell every time she saw him that inside his head he obsessed over finding the right moment to finish her off.

Chapter One

Bruce

“Adam, you’ll start a fire if you don’t watch the pot on the stove!”

Bruce Hitchens hurried into the kitchen and turned the flame off. He leaned on the counter for half a minute with his eyes closed and tried to drive away the images in his mind of the boiling water overflowing and the whole house burning down. He was a man of medium height and build, with intense dark brown eyes and black hair dotted with specks of grey. He ran a hand through his hair. When he looked at his hand, he noticed a grey hair had fallen out. At forty-two years old, he had been seeing a lot more grey hairs in the last few weeks. Ever since his son returned home, Bruce had neglected to dye his hair. He shut his eyes tight and his chin touched his chest. One more thing he couldn't find time for.

"Oooh!" Adam walked into the kitchen and put his hand over his mouth. "Daddy, I was just lookin' at the flowers outside! I love lookin' at the flowers I planted with Mommy."

"Adam." Bruce raised his head. Slowly and carefully he turned around to face his son. "There's a time to look at flowers and there's a time to watch a pot so it doesn't boil over and burn the house down." By the time he finished his sentence he was gritting his teeth and balling his hands into fists. He then took out a potholder and removed the lid. He saw the limp macaroni popping up under the blackened cheese.

Thank God I remembered to buy antacids yesterday, he thought.

"I'm cookin' my specialty t'night, Daddy—mac 'n' cheese," Adam declared, holding his head high, seemingly oblivious to his father's agitated state.

Bruce nodded with his shoulders slumped, still leaning on the counter for support.

This moment was just one more of his many second thoughts about bringing Adam home. His son had resided in the Fairmount Home for six weeks, ever since his wife Maggie had passed away. Bruce sank down into the chair of his tiny kitchen, rubbing his temples as he once again weighed his options.

"Suppa's ready, Daddy," Adam smiled as he stirred the burnt dinner with a spoon already covered in cheese. "I can cook meals for you, Daddy, now that I'm back home." He looked over at his father and smiled.

Bruce groaned inwardly. A diatribe began in his mind with all the words he would never dare speak out loud.

Don't you realize what could've happened if I didn't walk in here at that moment because I needed a break? Do you actually think I want to eat a ruined meal? Adam, why do you have to be so dense? Where were you when brains were handed out?

Bruce immediately looked down in shame for thinking these thoughts about his own son. He prayed the day would never come when he let these words slip out in a moment of frustration. Adam couldn't help his disability any more than Maggie could help dying and leaving him to care for their disabled eighteen-year-old adult son alone.

"Adam!" Bruce yelled, his eyes bulging with alarm as he saw his son about to grab the pot barehanded.

"Daddy, I'm an expert cooker. Mommy said so!" Adam said as he opened the drawer where his mother kept the potholders, one hand flapping in the air. He had thick hands for a young man his size, also of medium height and build like his father. Only Adam had inherited his mother's wavy light brown hair and fairer complexion.

The twinkle in his big, round brown eyes and his generous smile reminded Bruce so much of Maggie that he briefly reminisced of when he first saw her nineteen years ago. His tender expression turned to a frown when he recalled telling her he wanted to wake up to her beautiful face for the rest of his life.

When the mac 'n' cheese was on the table, Bruce contemplated taking a bite or just moving the noodles and cheese around, pretending to eat. He slowly brought a few noodles to his mouth and was surprised to find the meal was still edible. But each plate had only small portions. "Didn't you make more macaroni, Adam?"

"Yeah, I did, Daddy, but a lot of the noodles got stuck at the bottom of the pot," his son said as he dug his fork into his plate.

Bruce heaved a sigh. *Burnt.*

His mind drifted back to the presentation he had to finish tonight and send to his team to go over tomorrow when Adam interrupted his thoughts.

"Daddy, let's go for a walk after suppa. OK?"

Bruce's last bite got stuck in his throat. He reached for his apple juice to help the pasta go down, wishing it were a stiff drink.

"Actually, Adam," Bruce put down his fork delicately as he looked at his son, "this isn't enough. I'm going to have to call for a pizza delivery."

His son wasn't offended at all. He lit up and said, "All right! I love pizza!"

Bruce couldn't help smiling. "Good. You start cleaning up and I'll look over some notes. Deal?" He held up his right hand.

"Deal!" Adam slapped his father's hand hard. Bruce held back a yelp and stopped himself from snapping at his son. He massaged his hand to calm the swelling.

"Sorry, Daddy." Adam covered his mouth with his hand. "I'm just excited 'bout pizza."

"Adam," Bruce said through gritted teeth, "you're getting stronger. You've got to control yourself. Don't ever slap somebody's hand so hard." Bruce held out his right hand. "Just shake it, son. Shake it."

Adam gently shook his father's hand, studying his father's face.

"What is it, Adam?"

"But Daddy, guys are tough. They like to play tough."

His father's eyes narrowed. "It doesn't mean we're made of steel. Men can break bones." Bruce held out his right hand and then balled it into a fist. "Where did you learn about guys being tough and playing tough anyway?"

"From TV. They showed guys runnin' around wit a ball and gettin' dirty . . ."

"Adam, running is one thing and slapping is another."

Bruce closed his eyes, trying to control his temper. Hunger and the burnt smell of cheese were trying his patience.

Adam looked down, his eyes sad. "Sorry, Daddy. I just wanna be the way boys are supposta be."

Bruce stared at him, his anger turned to sympathy, at a loss for words. If only life were fairer and his son had a chance.

He finally found his voice. “All right, Adam. I’ll be going over my notes. You clean up and we’ll call for the pizza.”

As Igor lay in bed, he couldn’t sleep because he was too busy thinking, planning.

Surely I’ll be able to find a weapon to do away with her once we get off the ship. His body trembled in anticipation of that event. He would explain to Andre how, in a fit of madness, she had attacked him once they arrived at shore. She’d lost her mind after she realized what they were going to force her to do. For a brief moment, Igor thought about using the excuse that she tried to escape, but he dismissed that immediately.

These women had no escape; they were completely under his control. They were simple girls who knew no English. The very sight of their malnourished bodies and dirty clothes would frighten any stranger away.

Igor turned to his side and felt his eyelids give way. After secretly bringing the women to shore, he would have the task of feeding them and finding them decent clothes. His insides got aroused thinking of all the power he and the other men had over them.

But that one girl, he thought. *Why did she seem sharper and more sophisticated than the rest?* Was it because they had taken her captive differently than their usual method? Unlike the others, they knew little about her.

Exhaustion finally swept over Igor; he welcomed the calm stillness of sleep, for tomorrow would be a busy and important day.

***True Mercy* by Idelle Kursman may be purchased on Amazon as a print or ebook**