



THE DEVIL
YOU KNOW

SARA CURRAN-ROSS

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The Devil You Know Sara Curran Ross
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FOR JEREMY AND EMILY JANE

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Chapter One

Christian takes hold of the girl's arm and pushes it up her back tight. He knows it is painful and uncomfortable enough for her to feel the tingle of blood draining from her arm, he knows the feeling well. She's a fighter. He knows he's too strong for her, but she's still trying to get free. He feels a sharp stab of pain when her nails scrape and dig along his wrist, drawing blood. Instinctively he swears, violently pushing his hand hard into the small of her back, watching her fall onto the sparsely carpeted floor. She cries out and a small part of him twists with remorse. Hell, he can't take any chances, working in security to the famous and the stinking rich has gained him too many enemies that want to see him dead or disgraced and run out of Paris, even if she is a pretty bundle of skirt. He straddles her, holding both arms up her back, hurling french at her like there is no tomorrow. She answers back in fluent French, straining to raise her head from the dirty yellow carpet he has her face squashed into.

"So you are English, you might want to work on your accent," he tells her in english. "Now maybe you would like to tell me what you are doing creeping into my room from the balcony in the middle of the damn night?"

"Let me go, please. I had no choice. I jumped balconies. A man forced his way into my room."

She has a soft voice, gentle and feminine, yet he hears something hissing with controlled bitterness behind her words. She sounds afraid of him, as she should be, but he's not so sure. He sighs impatiently, determined to make her feel afraid so she will tell him the truth. He pulls harder on her arms until he hears her squeal. He's met her type before, all cotton candy, sugar sweet girl, but more deadly than any man could ever be.

"Try again and tell me the truth."

“It’s not as though I had a choice.”

This time he definitely hears the hiss behind her speech as she spits her words out. He feels his brow crease with surprise. He’s right, she isn’t afraid as much as she should be, it’s almost as though she is attempting to control her temper with him. He laughs inside, he’s intrigued.

“Tell me the truth. If you’d stop struggling, it wouldn’t hurt so much. Who are you? Maybe the police know who you are. Maybe I should call them.”

He feels a sudden tightness in her body. It’s like her blood has frozen or her heart has stopped. She’s gone cold, really cold, he can feel her fear. She’s silent and then she stutters.

“A...A...All right, let me up and I will tell you who I am and what I was doing.”

She sounds calm, calculated and bitter, but he decides to take a chance that she isn’t bluffing, he doesn’t like the tight feeling in her body. He pulls her up sharply in one swift motion and drags her nearer the bed. He turns on the lamp sitting on the side table, casting a low dim light over the faded yellow bedspread that looks as if it hasn’t been changed in the last thirty years. He lets go of her arms and watches her rub her wrists. She seems afraid to look up at him, make eye contact. But then she chances it.

Now the light is on and he isn’t straining to look at her in the moonlight coming in through the shrouded french windows, he gets a better look at her. Her eyes are green, the colour almost an exact match for emeralds, twinkling like jewels at him, more than tempting. She’s small and curved, a slim hourglass he decides. He notices his tallness and uses it to his advantage to intimidate her, leaning over her like the Leaning Tower of Pisa. He gives her the once over, studying her with scrutiny for signs that would give her game and identity away. She blushes and lowers her eyes to his chest. He follows them and suddenly realises his black shirt isn’t buttoned up after he pulled it on in a hurry

when she came through the French windows. He gives her a lazy, mocking smile, and he sees a flicker of embarrassed irritation flash across her eyes. He grins wider. He doesn't know the woman and neither does she know him, there is no history between them, so why does he get the feeling that she hates him already?

He stands in front of her. "So you've been in trouble with the police before?"

He takes out his mobile and starts punching in the numbers of the Surete. Time to call the pretty lady's bluff.

"No, no please not the police."

Now she sounds frightened, now he might get somewhere. He allows another smile to light his face, this time it's sadistic. Now he has her trapped. Again he sees irritation, bitterness clouding her eyes with frustration. As he watches her hands curl into fists at her sides, he decides to push it further. He knows she wants to hit him and make a dash for it, but then he knows she wouldn't get far.

He looks at her questioningly with his eyes. He puts his hands on his hips and looks down at her.

"No I haven't been in trouble with them before," she sounds as though she is trying to keep her temper again. He watches her mentally try to rein herself in, softening her voice. "I wasn't trying to steal anything. What I have told you is true. If you don't believe me, come back to my room, and I will show you. He will still be there," her eyes are swimming with tears, but she appears to be fighting to hold them in check. Her voice sounds upper crust English, sexy.

He shakes his head, holds his phone up and presses re-dial. He watches her bottom lip tremble as they both listen to it ring. She whimpers when she hears the tiny disembodied voice on the other end of the phone answer the call. Time seems to hang paralysed in the air.

"You will have to do better than that."

“Please, look I will do anything you ask, anything if you will just let me go.”

She’s using that fragile voice again. He sees her search his face for some kind of sympathy, some gallant gesture. But he knows the steel armour he wears over his features is impenetrable. Her head bows and long, honey coloured curls cascade around her shoulders. He doesn’t have to see to know that she is trying to hide tears. She gives a small sniff then slowly lifts her head. Her cheeks are wet, but there is a look of determined will on her face. He can throw what he likes at her, but she will still fight him. He can’t work her out. Jutting her pretty chin out at him, she holds her head high, daring him to do it, she can take it. He watches her jump when he snaps the phone shut.

“Who hit you?” he asks, studying the bruising along her cheek, clearly visible since she’s raised her head up at him, and her hair isn’t hiding the side of her face anymore.

The strength in her eyes flickers and dies. She looks at him confused, he’s unsettled her. She drops her chin immediately. He moves towards her, and she takes a step back. Gently this time he takes her arm and pulls her back to heel, still feeling resistance running strong within her. He wants a closer look, wants to know more about her. He carefully cups her chin to tilt her head to one side, it is an effort. She tenses even further when he smooths his fingertips over the dramatic mixture of violet and dark blue. He makes his touch careful, protective, as he turns her back to face him.

“Who hit you?” he repeats his question, softly.

“He didn’t hit me this time, it was when he banged my head off the wall,” her words are a whisper as he sees her mentally replay back the memory through her eyes as they scrunch and sting with pain.

It’s his turn to tense. He blinks and feels the familiar anger that’s coiled so tight inside him raise its ugly head. Just like Marie, just like Marie, beaten and raped and

there was nothing he could do, nothing he could do. The woman is looking at him with confusion again, trying to read his thoughts again, second guessing what is coming next. He stares at her, sees the pain behind her eyes, sees her strength shining through at him like a defiant beacon. He can't help but admire it. His features lose their hardness, damn it he is a fool, but she's touched something deep inside his heart, struck a chord with something that has turned hard, black, and is withering since Marie's death. She's feeding it a little water and giving it some hope that it can live again. He stops staring at her and curses loudly. She jumps in response again.

"You are safe for now, beautiful, but if you don't tell me what you are in my room for..." He stops, feels frustrated. Damn it, she's unsettled him. "I will have no choice but to turn you over to the police." He's not going to let her win and catch him off guard. Since Marie he's learnt the hard way about falling for women and feeling sorry for them. Maybe he should try another tactic with this woman. He toughens inside again, intent on not allowing her fragility and pretty face to seep through his skin and knock him off guard. He's seen this all before.

He replaces his fingers back on her cheek. Her eyes look down at his fingers with suspicion.

"Hush, I won't hurt you like him."

"Look, I didn't come here to steal anything. Please let me go."

He ignores the plea in her voice.

"You came into my room unannounced, uninvited in the middle of the night."

He strokes her cheek gently.

"Look I've already told you..."

He holds her chin up until he can feel her straining on his grip. He's showing his power over her.

“I don’t believe you. How about you stop playing games and tell me why you are here? Did someone send you? Are you here to seduce me for them?”

He can’t resist giving her the once over again, admiring the perfect plump swell of her breasts in the little black dress she is wearing. He wouldn’t mind being seduced by her, but he did have a reputation to uphold. To be caught with a prostitute in a run-down hotel in the middle of Pigalle with a bruise to the girl’s face, could conjure up some interesting stories and false accusations that could ruin him. Just like his father wants. It is probably him who sent her. It is what his father does best, knowing people’s weakness, exploiting it and using it against them until they gave him what he wanted. And they always did. Then he killed them for it. Well this time Gabriel Dumont and his precious Mafia family would have to do without his illegitimate and only son. The prodigal son would not be returning to take over the family business and perpetuate the family line. He escaped years ago, and he is never going back, not even if hell freezes over. This time the evil bastard will just have to do without.

She looks directly at him.

“Don’t be stupid. I came over the balcony from the room next door. If I wanted to take your virtue, I would hardly risk my life like that would I?”

His eyebrows rise, and he can’t help smiling. The woman has balls, he likes that.

“I don’t know. I’ve heard worse stories.”

The amusement lining his words seems too much for her, and he watches her eyes narrow to sharp points.

“What is your name?” He lowers his voice to a whisper once more.

“Isabelle,” she answers automatically and visibly regrets her slip of the tongue. She begins moving her feet, feeling the heat of the painful strain on her neck and chin.

“That’s a beautiful name Isabelle.”

His hands slip to her neck, his fingertips trailing her skin, just where he knows she will be most sensitive to touch. She freezes, looks at him with undisguised horror. But he feels her cold skin warm against his fingers.

“Isabelle who?”

She closes her mouth tight shut. He grins and decides not to pursue her name any further.

“Isabelle is fine. Now Isabelle there is something you could do for me, something that would excuse what you have done here tonight and what you have come here to do.”

“But I haven’t done anything, and I’m not here to do anything,” she’s most insistent trying to disguise the audible panic in her shaky voice.

He puts a finger to her lips to beckon silence and cups her bare shoulders with his hands. They sizzle like a brand against her flushed skin. His hands slide over her skin like silk, she can hardly breathe. He makes his touch light, arousing, and watches her eyes glaze despite herself and the rigorous, defiant posture she holds in front of him and the scowl on her face. He feels a surge of triumph. For all of her pretence, he can see desire blazing hot in her eyes. She looks away.

Coyness is attractive in a woman, he muses.

She will give in any moment and confess everything, then they can really get down to business. But then it’s better if she doesn’t so he can seduce the truth from her. It is an interesting game they are both playing. He walks around her and finds the zip of her dress. It’s a beautiful dress, soft, silky, just like her skin. It clings enticingly over her slim rounded curves. She’s so small and dainty. Her skin is soft and creamy, and there’s sadness in the recesses of her eyes, threatening to shatter her into a million tiny pieces.

His father is getting good at their game. He knows that his son is always a sucker for a damsel in distress. But

daddy should have heard the news as of six months ago. He isn't fooled so easily now, he's left all of that behind. No woman will ever be allowed to get that close again. His days of playing the knight in shining armour, rescuing fair damsels in distress are over. He is more likely to be causing them distress. He ignores the stab of guilt and carries on.

Feeling sorry for people got you nowhere, they always turned on you at some stage.

He finds the zip. She smells so clean and fresh, pure and delicate. There's a smell of jasmine and wild flowers on her skin. She is a breath of fresh air in this horrible dingy and dirty room. He hears her breath dry and shrivel in her throat. He fingers the zip, pausing; waiting. She remains silent so he takes it as consent. He carefully pulls the zip down ever so slowly, wanting her to feel the cool air hanging in the room as he exposes each delicious part of her body. It's like taking a peek under the wrapping of a present before Christmas.

He knows she feels vulnerable and can't help but relish his power. Although she is desperately trying to ignore it, he knows she is feeling aroused. He carefully opens the dress and stands back surveying her lightly tanned skin. He feels her shrink as he fingers the bridge of a strapless, black lace bra encasing her breasts. He continues the action, once again giving her time to object, to give in. Not a word. For a brief moment he suddenly realises that he might not hold all the power after all, instead she has it.

He frowns, he can't resist her and she knows. She is the one making him do the entire running, making him please her and tease her into giving him the truth. But it won't stop him. He doesn't care anymore, can only see what he wants and needs and will take it. He replaces his palms on her shoulders. He lowers them down her back with firm pressure and feels her shiver against them. His hands dip to grasp her naked waist and pull her sharply

back against him before plunging eagerly down onto the flimsy lace and satin underwear that so prettily matches her bra. He can see the pert cheeks of her buttocks and feels an ache swell inside him. His response is to pull her back further until his hardness nestles between them, and she can feel it hard and pulsing, urging her taking.

Again, there is no sound escaping her lips. He's perplexed, but it doesn't stop him. He strokes those fingers that have become so expert at pleasuring a woman to get what he needs through her honey hair. It's so soft. It smells of peaches and cream. He presses his nose against it. A woman hasn't smelt so sweet and pure to him in a long time. He wants to bury his face in her sweetness and disappear.

He gives a small inward laugh, *listen to you, you sound just like a bloody woman.*

He returns his fingers to the thin straps of her dress resting on her shoulders. She shivers as he slides them down and a little whimper escapes her lips. He pauses again but nothing.

He wants her body revealed, to expose every secret part of her, to conquer her will. He can see her following the descent of her dress with him as it caresses and swishes down across her more than ample attributes. He moves in with the expertise of a skilled hunter trapping his prey. She jumps when she feels the catch of her bra being lifted before the dress has even reached the ground. She gasps with horror and quickly cups her breasts covering them for protection. He hears himself give a small laugh and brushes his eager fingers down her side to soothe her fear.

"Don't be coy with me Isabelle, give me your breasts," he whispers seductively against her ear, knowing her skin is tingling with excitement, begging for his touch. He sweeps his hands around her body until they cover her own over her breasts. He caresses her hands and leans in close. They are beautifully manicured, but she's been trying

to nibble at them, like a secret nail biter. Everything about her says money and vulnerability, but sneaking into his room in the middle of the night and her willingness to face him down says different. He should check out her story, but he doesn't really care now if it is true or not. He just wants her. He starts to prise her hands away, and with some struggle he succeeds. He groans, cupping the soft feminine flesh so greedily.

He feels her involuntarily arch her back and press her breasts tight into his palms. So she wants this just as much as he does. He won't disappoint her. Her wish is his command. Her nipples are so hard and erect, more evidence of her arousal. He pulls them sharply and hears her cry out with pleasure, arching her back against him. Her breathing is laboured with desire, and her eyes are closed as if she is ashamed. He turns her around and looks down at her small voluptuous form that is being offered as a sacrifice.

It's a struggle for him to keep control. She slowly looks up at him. Her eyes display her soul that's a mixture of dangerous want and fatal fragility. Her pale brown lips are full and swollen with a fine sheen of moisture glistening. She's so beautiful standing there, and she's all his for that moment. The notion hits him hard in the stomach as though he's just been punched. His hands grip her hips possessively and tug her towards him. He strokes a digit over her clit. It's so wet, the material barring his touch is soaked through. He's made her like this, it makes him feel strong, giving him the illusion of being in control again.

At that moment, he knows he is the only one who can satisfy the desire pounding inside her. He won't wait anymore. His hand grips the top of her panties and rips them hard, shredding the material to the floor. Her pelvis bucks against him and the motion of the contact is nearly enough to send him over the edge. Those pouting lips open to gasp, and he captures them, desperate to taste her

essence. He wrestles her tongue and reigns dominant. He can't wait, he can't wait. She's like some kind of drug he needs. Only she can satisfy his painful ache. He unzips his trousers and looks down at the black lacy hold ups still adorning her legs and thinks how damn sexy she looks.

He turns back and snatches her mouth, feeling her arms slip around his neck. He smiles against her mouth in triumph. He lifts her up and cruelly pulls her buttocks apart before pushing her back callously onto the wooden bedpost, and then he spears his cock inside her so fast and deep and makes his kill. He drives inside her, feeling her begin to tighten around him. She cries out, he's driving so fast, and she's helplessly bucking against him, sliding up and down the post. He comes so hot and deep. Its pleasure is so painful and consuming. She comes a second after, and he can see the pained ecstasy on her face riding her like a reluctantly saddled horse until it breaks her in. He captures her lips again, unable to stop himself. He sucks tenderly on her bottom lip. Her lips rise to meet his, they are as hungry as his own.

“You are a very beautiful woman Isabelle,” he means it.

She opens her eyes and stares at him with confusion and disbelief as though no man has ever complimented her before like that. He finds it hard to believe. He's never met a woman like her. She holds something potent he needs. He's never felt so intoxicated with sex before. Christian looks at her face, it's wearing some kind of euphoria, like she's never experienced sex before. But that's not possible, she must be in her early to mid-thirties, hell she can't be a virgin. Who is she? That's the way it is for him now, sex first, name later, if desired, that way it's safer.

He's won their little game, now to make her tell him who she is and what she is doing in his room. He stares down at her again, curling his hand around her face, he doesn't know why, it just feels natural. He feels an

overwhelming urge to kiss her but resists, suddenly afraid of the power she has over him. He's not used to being out of control, and it's happening more and more these days. Her legs are still wrapped around him, he's still deep inside her, hardening again. He wants her once more but he can't, it isn't right even though it's a hypocritical thought to have. He feels a pang of guilt and dismisses it quickly. As if to prevent himself from coaxing her to fuck again, he lowers her legs to the floor and slips out of her body.

She doesn't know where to look, she's embarrassed. He zips up his trousers and gallantly picks up her dress and holds it out to her. He looks at the shredded underwear and scoops it up in his hand and throws it in the small waste paper bin, there's nothing to salvage. She watches it land in the bin, and he hears himself apologise. He watches her, mesmerised, as she hurriedly scoops up her bra and puts it on. She pulls the dress up over those sexy hips, swaying them from side to side as she slides the material up her body.

She shouldn't be let out with that body, it's lethal, he decides.

She folds her arms across her chest and looks around the room. She appears unable to meet his eyes. What next? What kind of game is she playing? She should be flattered with his attention. She's supposed to use it to her advantage, offer him her delights, the treasures of her body, work her way out with her looks, she's already reeled him in. His eyes lower to her chest but something catches his eyes just above it.

He moves closer gently catching her arm as she tries to back away, whispering that he won't hurt her. More bruising, he feels pissed off at himself, pissed off at her for having bruising and making him think about it and what he should have done with her. He finds fading purple and yellow bruising around her neck in a perfect circlet. A man has tried to strangle her.

He feels a familiar rage slash down his middle and settle with fury in his fists. How could a man inflict damage like that on such delicate fragile skin? He doesn't even know him but he wants to kill him anyway. Ignoring her small protests, he cups her throat and trails his fingertips along it, reflecting on the scenario in which she received the injury. He makes sure his touch is light, just like a feather's, knowing how much pain she could be in.

A painful memory creases his brow, tenses his hand a small amount as he touches her, afraid of the connection to his recent past. He sees Marie lying in her home, the one she'd gone back to, trying to make things work with that bastard husband of hers, the one she left him for. There's blood everywhere, her skull's caved in, she's naked, raped several times. Her drunken husband is slobbering all over her, saying he's sorry, he's sorry over and over again.

The words ring in his ears even now. He'd tried to help her, but she wouldn't let him, kept making excuses for the bastard. That time he'd washed his hands of her, told her that if she went back, he couldn't help her again. She didn't want his help. He'd washed his hands over her, let her go back. He should have tied her to a chair. That bastard, it's all he can call him, that bastard and his mates thought it would be fun to take turns with her and when she objected, he'd caved her head in. He blinks trying to clear the image from his mind and realises he can't breathe. It had taken nearly ten gendarmes to keep him off the fucking bastard.

He suddenly backs away from Isabelle afraid of the force of his anger, knowing she is the trigger of his guilt. She looks at him bemused, fear creeping back into her eyes. He puts his hands on his hips feeling awkward and a little remorseful.

"Listen, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have..." he stops, she's heading for the door.

He catches her arm easily and swings her back round.

“Hey not so fast, you still haven’t told me what you were doing in my room.”

She looks at him as if he is poison. He can feel her trembling, he wonders whether it is with fear or being close to him. She can look at him like that all she wants, but he knows that she wanted what just happened between them as much as he did. He could feel it, see it written all over her face. Something has happened between them in this rundown cheap hotel in the middle of Pigalle. It’s more than just a casual fuck, she possesses something he suddenly realises he needs, and he feels it’s the same for her. Maybe it’s what those stupid yanks call a connection, maybe they got something right after all. He swears under his breath, he sounds like a fucking Romeo. That’s something the old Christian would say, the new one is cynical and bitter, it’s better that way.

Her cheeks are paling and for a moment he wonders if she is going to pass out. He shouldn’t have pushed it with her, hell knows what else that bastard has done to her. He begins to guide her to the bed, mindful that she should sit down, or even lie down. But she struggles like mad, neatly twists her wrist and slips it from his hand and runs. He follows her out into the corridor calling after her. He takes hold of both her arms just before she walks through the open door of her room, right next door, the room he didn’t believe she was staying in. They both stop dead in their tracks when they see what is lying in wait.

Chapter Two

The grimy yellow room, identical to Christian's, is in complete disarray. Isabelle's clothes, suits and dresses are lying bandied across the floor. The drawers and cupboard are wide open and bare. The contents of her bag are strewn on top of the chest of drawers next to them. It's as though everything has been dropped in the middle of the room and a hand has swept through it all looking for something. There's an odour Christian has smelt before and knows well, the smell of sex, he can't help looking at her and wondering. The woman doesn't take too kindly to his look and starts struggling like mad. She swings a punch at him whilst he looks at the room again. Her fist makes contact with his stomach. What's the matter, too much of a lady to hit him in the face? That's twice, she's caught him off guard and wounded his male pride, she's going to pay. He straightens up rubbing his stomach, for small hands she has a hard punch.

He watches her stare at the bed covers on top of which whoever ransacked her room has left something. He takes the opportunity to find out who she is and picks up her passport that is lying on the floor near him. He flicks through it and an ashen colour sweeps across his face. He's just made the second biggest mistake of his life, and his best friend will kill him for sure. And this time he might have just cause. He didn't even have a photograph of her, everything was so last minute. How the hell was he supposed to know it was his best friend's sister he'd been hired to protect? He hadn't expected her to come sneaking into his room, he was just supposed to find her at the hotel tomorrow morning. Philip didn't ring to say she'd come earlier. Shit, shit.

He joins her beside the bed nervously wondering how he is going to tell her about his mistake and what the

best way of apologising would be. Maybe if he does it right, things might just be ok. His thoughts stop abruptly, she's mumbling to herself, pushing her hair back behind her ears over and over again in an agitated manner.

She keeps saying to herself, "But he's never gone this far before."

Who is she talking about? Her eyes flicker wildly up and down the bed. She's looking at a red see-through basque placed ceremoniously at the pillow to dress an invisible whore lying on the bed, a red thong opened invitingly at the crotch. She glances at the table next to the bed, at the bundle of Euros that lie there, payment for imaginary services rendered. She puts her hand over her mouth to stifle a cry of horror from her lips and puts the other on her hips in an effort to appear in control of her emotions. But she can't stop the welling of tears in her eyes or stop them running down her cheeks. She shakes her head as though she has been defeated by something. There is a pair of handcuffs next to the display. Hesitantly she removes her hand from her mouth, only appearing to be vaguely aware of Christian's presence. Her head is turning, catching something written on the mirror in thick red lipstick.

"Still burning with a vagina hardened by lust she retired, exhausted by men but not yet satisfied." A low growl rumbles in her throat as she reads it. She reaches for the lamp on the dressing table and is poised to throw it at the mirror. He grabs her raised wrist.

"Don't, I want to have finger prints taken. What is it?"

"It's from Juvenal Satires," she tells him with cold contempt through her tears.

He needs to talk to her badly, explain who he is and what he was sent to do by her brother. Also, he needs to get his friend down here fast to get some prints taken.

"Come on Isabelle, let's get you out of here."

She brushes his restraining hand on her arm away, stands and looks around the room before running to the other side of the bed. She runs past a small writing desk, the owner's attempt to smarten the room up. It's old and ready to fall apart. There's a piece of paper wedged under one of its legs. She's now on her knees next to the desk looking for some papers. He finds his eyes curiously drawn to it. The chair is pulled out as if someone has been sitting there, and there is a used cup and saucer. He looks down at the cup, there are no remnants of that pretty shade of pink lipstick Isabelle is wearing, although somewhat depleted after sex. He's never known a woman not leave her mark on a cup before. He grabs one of her many silk scarves off the floor, no doubt to hide the bruises that are inflicted upon her, and picks up the cup. He can feel warmth permeating from the cup through the silk scarf. He hurriedly puts it back down on the saucer.

They have missed him by minutes, he could even be close by, watching through the open door somehow to see how Isabelle takes the present he has left her. If she was alone, maybe ready to pounce and catch his prey. He feels a cold chill and runs out into the hallway to see if he can see anything. He doesn't like this type of enemy. It's like fighting the IRA in Ireland, he never knew where they were coming from. He needs to know what he is up against so he can do his job and do what he was sent to do effectively, protect Isabelle from the violent boyfriend who pursues her and her inheritance with an obsession. This he hadn't expected.

Christian looks around the room, the smell of sex is still hanging in the air, it's potently male and offensive. Then he sees it. It is on a chair near the window at the far end of the room. There's a creamy liquid mixture running rivulets through a pool of white silk, dripping gently on to the floor, semen. The man has obviously got off and used one of Isabelle's dresses as a substitute for her presence. He

feels anger coil tight around his body squeezing his chest. Images of Marie entering his mind again, he clenches his fists at his sides. He wants Isabelle out of the room fast before she sees it. He walks straight towards her and yanks her up with force, refusing to hear any protests. He marches her to the door in quick time, aware that her feet are hardly touching the ground, it's quicker and safer that way. He makes sure his body is placed solidly behind her and he retains his firm grip on both of her arms as he steers her to the door. But she's determined not to be pushed around and digs her heels into the ground pushing back into him, shouting something about her bag and let her go. He ignores her, issuing the command for her to leave the room or he will carry her. She catches hold of the door, and when he's trying to prise her persistent fingers away, whilst managing her struggling body, she sees her bag and then the semen. She stops.

"What's that? What's that on my nightdress?" her voice is barely an audible whisper.

Her fingers are loose, unguarded. His arm winds around her waist and easily lifts her into the air and through the door. He sets her down, still keeping a firm hold of her waist and closes the door behind him. She struggles.

"Let me go. What was that? Is it what I think it is? Is it semen?" she asks the question timidly after she's screamed at him to let her go.

He lifts her again and carries her back to his room, locking the door behind him.

"Stop pushing me around. It is semen isn't it? I'm not stupid that was my nightdress."

He feels her shiver violently in his grip.

"Yeah it was. I don't want you going in there again. We have to talk," he softens his voice. "And you need a drink."

He needs one himself. It's unnerving, calculated and cold, designed to strike fear and terror and let the

victim know he's watching her every move. He lets go and watches her walk to one of the chairs and sit down. She puts her head in her hands. He wants to hold her and protect her. But his subconscious makes him take a step back from impending disaster.

"Look Isabelle, there's been a mistake," he sounds so formal when he begins to work. "Philip sent me. I am here to protect you."

Her head shoots up, and she stares at him with suspicion then gives a small nervous laugh of disbelief. Her face is so tear-stained and fragile. He tightens his features hard, he's damned if he is going to let her get to him. There is a pause, he can see she isn't sure whether she should believe him or not. He can tell by the contempt that creeps into her eyes from the corners that she decides not to.

"I do not believe you," she says sternly, her head is raised high and she looks regal and beautiful with it. He hates her for making him feel this way about her, why did she have to walk into his life and disturb his comforting downward spiral? She checks the room for means of escape. He can mentally see her working out how she can make a run for the door. He positions himself between the door and her chair, removing the threat. Although she's the type to try it anyway, and from what he's seen, she isn't bad at looking after herself.

"Philip didn't send you, nobody is supposed to know anything, let alone that I am here."

She looks at him as though he is scum of the earth. He doesn't blame her after what she's been through to sit in this room with him. Anyway, lately she'd be right to call him scum. The important thing is to make her believe him, it's vital, and Philip warned him it would be difficult to gain her trust. Why should she trust him after the way he's just fucked her? He feels that pang of guilt again, it's stronger this time.

“Declan sent you, didn’t he? This is one of his tricks. You gain my confidence and then it’s easier to bring me back. Where’s the needle? The drugs to silence me? Are they next after you’ve convinced me someone is stalking me and frightened me into coming back?”

She’s standing, her legs are shaking, anger is blazing so hot in her eyes he is sure she will explode. Her voice is high and ever so bitter. He wants to hold her again. Instead he snaps at her.

“Keep your voice down and sit down before I make you.”

She stops. There’s indignation and horror all at once on her face but her eyes are narrowing, and he knows she is fighting to control her temper. He’s intrigued to find out what’s underneath the fragile exterior. She looks around the room as if somebody is going to jump out of the cupboard. Fat chance, it’s a miracle it is standing. He walks towards her, something makes him lay his hand on her arm in an effort to provide warmth and reassurance. She shakes it off as if it’s poison. Her rejection stings him. He puts both hands by his side, he feels awkward. He backs off.

“If you aren’t with Declan, you will let me go. I am walking out of this room now,” she challenges.

“No. I am not letting you go anywhere Isabelle,” he says it so softly he can see tears brim in her eyes again. She turns her features hard, puts up a barrier. It’s then that he sees the pain, years of beatings, being kept prisoner, years without love and care.

His face must show his concern because she says, “I don’t want your pity Mr....”

“Dalban. It’s Christian Dalban. I am here to help you Isabelle, I am here to keep you out of that damn prison Declan Mayer keeps trying to lock you up in. If you won’t trust me, then we will have to do this the hard way, and I will have to give you no choice.”

Fucking hell, she's impossible, headstrong. She's heading for the door. Now he can see why she has survived for so long. He swings an arm easily around her waist and brings her back. She kicks him hard in the shin and swings another punch at him. He catches it this time and pushes her backwards and down into the chair. She goes to stand up again, he points a finger at her warning her not to push him. Her eyes narrow to a sharp point and she stares directly at him.

"Or what? You'll hit me? Do you think I am afraid of you Mr. Dalban?"

He can hear her bitterness and anger loud and clear now. She is giving it to him full throttle.

"You're nothing like him. Declan has his own special brand of terror to inflict. He's held my head under water until I bordered on death, and it took two paramedics to revive me," she shakes with anger. "He's beaten me so many times, the doctors aren't sure I will ever be able to carry a child. They know me by first name at the hospital. Drugged to the point I don't even know who I am anymore just to keep me quiet and obedient, and he's murdered all those who were close to me or tried to help me escape him. You can keep hitting me Mr. Dalban, and I'll keep standing up. I've been hit so many times I'm numb. You can't hurt me."

He knows he looks taken aback by her cruel satisfied smile that her verbal punch has hit home.

"Give me a damn chance woman," he backs away shaken by her words, he couldn't hit a woman unless she was a threat to his work or his life.

No, just push her into fucking you when she's frightened for her life, his inner voice scolds.

Her statements about her life ring true about Declan. He was the type of boy who pulled the legs off spiders and wings off bees and fought viciously with the other kids as a child. He remembers the summers they were

forced to spend time together as the future heirs of two of the strongest mafia families in Europe, all to cement the special relationship. The hate between them was mutual. What she is describing is true Declan style, only a couple of notches up, he doesn't usually get his own hands dirty when killing or maiming someone. But he has always been handy with his fists, especially around his many girlfriends at college, always getting away with whatever he did because he was the grandson of one of the most feared crime heads in England. It seemed to be some kind of turn on for some women. But what the bastard has done to Isabelle makes him burn. Declan is a fucking bastard. She must have got under his skin, he must actually love her. That's what he did to the people he loved when he wanted them body and soul all to himself.

Refocus your thoughts, she doesn't need your sympathy, she needs action, reassurance, trust, give her some.

He walks to his leather jacket lying on the chair and pulls out a letter. He keeps her in his sight all of the time. She is sitting upright on the edge of the chair, both hands gripping the sides, poised ready to pounce to freedom. She watches his every move with frowning hooded eyes displaying contempt and suspicion that knows no bounds. He holds the letter out to her, commanding her to read with stark authority. She looks at it, then back at him with contempt, then the door, all the time weighing up her options. He knows she realises she will not get passed him. She snatches the letter out of his hand, her face pales when she catches sight of her name written. She must realise it is Philip's writing. Something's struck home, she's opening the letter.

"It explains everything," he tells her.

He puts his hands in his pockets. It's then that he realises he hasn't buttoned his shirt up and hurriedly does

it, grateful for something to do in the awkward silence as she reads.

“What is he doing?” she mutters to herself whilst reading.

Christian frowns.

“He wants to protect you. He wants me to help you get away from Mayer.”

“Why you?” she demands a quick answer.

“Because protecting is my business, and I’m damn good at it.”

She gives him the once over as if she is interviewing him for the position of champion. She’s not convinced.

“He’s says you are special, and only you can protect me, and I am not to leave your side at any cost. Why are you so special, compared to the others he’s got to help me? They all failed, some of them even lost their lives.”

Christian feels uncomfortable.

“I’ve told you, I’m the best,” he says it with conviction because he believes it.

He needs her to find strength in his conviction. It’s one reason, the other he can’t afford to tell her or she will never trust him. This would be the only time he would rely on his father’s reputation and power to strike mortal fear in the enemy. He doesn’t like it any more than she would if she knew the truth about who he is, but it is the only way to grant her freedom. Philip knew that and so did he, and she deserves every chance at life like any other person. He is beginning to think she is more than worth it. She folds the letter in two. Her hands are shaking a little but she seems calmer, more relaxed. It’s done the trick. He breathes easier.

“I don’t want anybody’s help. Declan will buy you just like he has done with all of the others, and if he can’t, he’ll kill you,” she says quietly, resigned, her face is softening again.

He wants to laugh at the very idea. Declan Mayer wouldn't dare, but he can't tell her that.

"Look Isabelle, Philip and I have been best friends since we both started in the army together, ten years ago. I am not going to let him down. We take turns in saving each other's lives and getting the other out of trouble. Last time I counted, it was my turn. You can trust me with your life Isabelle, and if you don't, I will have to make you. I am not letting Philip down."

He stands towering over her, hands on hips. She can't look at him now her anger has subsided, she's shy and introverted again. He's confused. She's given up looking at the door. Time to ring Jean-François and get him to come and look at the fucked up mess in her room and pick his police brain for ideas as to what is going on, and then for a drink. He tells her what he is doing and sets her on edge again.

"No, no you can't tell the police anything. He will find us through them. He owns everybody," she's up on her feet.

"Relax," he tells her. "I can trust this guy."

"No. You are far too trusting. You will have to learn not to trust anyone."

She's folding her arms and is pacing the floor, she's still shivering, probably from shock. Without thinking he goes to the bed and pulls off the top layer and swirls it around her, tucking it protectively around her chin. She looks at him surprised and confused.

"For shock, keep warm," he tells her and then backs off feeling like a fool.

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it."

He takes out his mobile phone from his jacket trying to appear unaffected and indifferent to what's happened between them in this squalid little room.

"No please don't ring them."

He looks impatient.

“I’ve told you I can trust him. If I am to be able to protect you effectively, you are going to have to learn to do what you’re told. There are no partners in this relationship. Now sit down and keep warm.”

She’s about to protest, but Jean-François answers the phone. He can see her hold her breath. He walks away from her towards the window, reception is dodgy. She scowls. Jean-François sounds half asleep and irritated by the interruption and for a brief moment Christian wants to laugh.

“I need you to come Jean-François, and I need you with people you can trust, it’s vital,” he finishes.

He hears Jean-François utter some French expletives, but he knows Jean-François will not let him down. He snaps the phone shut and stares at her pacing the floor.

“He’s on his way,” he tells her firmly.

“I don’t know how you think this is going to help.”

She’s pacing the floor so fast he thinks she’s going to wear out the thin carpet.

“Relax, we can trust him.”

She looks at him, he knows she doesn’t believe him but thinks better of saying anything else. She bites at the manicured nail on her thumb and then frantically lowers it with a groan as if it is habit she is trying to break.

“Right, a drink. I haven’t got any alcohol and that’s what you really need. But then tea is better for shock. How do you like it weak or strong? Milk and sugar?”

She looks up, shocked he wants to make her a cup of tea.

“Weak please, milk, not too much and one and a half teaspoons.”

He looks taken aback and smiles with amusement. She can hardly meet his eyes with her own and looks away embarrassed.