

THE  
**DEVIL**  
INSIDE

*by*  
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## CHAPTER ONE

A steady rain fell over a sea of dark umbrellas clustered around a pale canopy. Two lone figures sat beneath it, next to Marie Casey's gleaming, flower-decked casket. A dark-haired woman and a boy.

Father Andrew Goodman had feared he would one day preside over the funeral of a Casey sister but had never imagined Marie would be the one. He glanced toward the woman he had expected to bury young.

Derby Cain Casey—Cain to those who knew her—sat with one hand on her son's shoulder and the other on her sister's coffin. She looked deceptively calm, but beyond the face she revealed to the world, Father Andrew glimpsed a cold, terrifying rage. Before this was over, she would exact her own unique form of revenge. Blood would be spilled for the injustice dealt to the Casey family.

"Let us all remember Marie, the kind spirit whom God has called home." Father Andrew observed the large congregation gathered around him in the Metairie Cemetery just on the cusp of New Orleans and Jefferson Parish. The mourners seemed lost in their own fond memories of the young woman.

"To her parents, Dalton and Therese, she was a blessing from heaven whom they cherished from the day she entered their lives. They said that often after her birth. To her brother, Billy, she was someone to protect and love, and he did so until his final day here with us."

He removed his glasses so he could wipe tears from his eyes. The Lord could have cooperated with better weather on the final resting day of the beautiful girl he had baptized twenty-six years before. It didn't

matter to the more than two hundred people who had turned out, though. Many of them were more familiar with Marie's family than with the young woman they were there to honor. The Caseys' contributions to the community through charitable giving and deeds were as renowned as the way they allegedly earned their money.

"And to her sister, Cain, and nephew, Hayden, she was a harbor from the storm." Father Andy put his glasses back on and smiled at them, hoping to provide a little comfort. "Derby, I'm confident your parents and brother were all waiting with open arms to welcome her home. And with your family, I'm sure they had a party that'd do all the Caseys proud."

Cain disregarded the sniffles and laments of the family members standing nearby, but graced the priest with a nod for his generous words. They were only words, though, coming nowhere near to quelling the fury she felt inside for what had happened to her sister. Her life had often been marked by loss, but to lose Marie cut deep.

The man who had killed Marie obviously intended for Cain to dream for months about what he had done. He wanted the images of Marie's rape and torture to serve as a permanent reminder of how Cain had not only failed Marie, but her father as well, since she had inherited from him the responsibility of watching over Marie after his death. The killer had wanted her to remember that her sister had taken her last breaths alone and in pain.

If his intent was to brand her brain with his savagery, he had succeeded. Marie's barbaric murder had killed a part of Cain's soul as well. She would long remember every bite mark, bruise, and cigarette burn on Marie's body.

Soon, though, she would temper those cruel memories with the salve that came only through revenge. The man who stole Marie's dignity before pulling the trigger to end her misery would pay with blood and a world of pain. His price would be a thousand of Marie's lifetimes before Cain was through with him and God heard his pleas for the sweet peace of death.

No one in her life had loved her so unselfishly as Marie. As Father Andy continued his eulogy, Cain remembered the day Marie had turned ten.

"Derby, do you think I'm pretty?"

“No, Marie, I don’t think you’re pretty. I think you’re beautiful. You get any more that way and Billy and me will get into more fights than we’ll know how to win. You’re going to grow up so gorgeous, we’ll be beating them off at the door, there’ll be so many boys after you.”

The little black-haired girl held out the sides of her new pink dress and smiled into the mirror. “No, Derby, I want to grow up and take care of you.”

“Why do you say that, birthday girl?” Cain locked eyes with her and smiled back. No one could bring a smile to her face more easily than her little sister.

“’Cause you look like someone who’s going to need looking after.”

*Out of the mouths of babes, wasn’t that the old expression? At thirty-six, a much-older-feeling Derby Cain Casey lost track of what Father Andy was saying and looked to the oak box that held her baby sister. I’m so sorry, Marie. You did such a good job of taking care of Hayden and me, and I wasn’t there when you needed me most.*

Her sister had been special all right. No one in her family cared that her mind hadn’t matured normally, trapping her in a world of her own while freeing her to be the child she thought she was. Marie had been an innocent who had done an admirable job of helping Cain take care of her son, Hayden. Hayden and her sister had become so attached to each other, she worried about the effects her brutal death would have on him. He had already lost his mother; it didn’t seem fair to add Marie to the list.

The sprinkling of holy water dragged her away from her memories. All that was left to do was to place the casket in the family crypt so Marie could lie alongside their parents and their brother. For one eternal moment, Cain felt almost like an orphan as she stared at the headstones that marked the final resting place of her family.

She felt like crying but heeded well her father’s voice on this one unbending rule. As the head of the Casey family, she had been trained never to show weakness of any kind in public, so now was not the time to grieve. The priest came and momentarily took her hand before patting Hayden on the head. “The church is always here for you, Derby, if you’ve a need to talk. May God bless you and your son.”

Behind them, the line of mourners moved toward their cars, looking like dead flowers cast on a lazy river. None of the attendees wanted to bother Cain and Hayden as they said their last good-byes. The ever-present wall of guards had closed ranks around them, ensuring their privacy. When she didn't answer, Father Andy joined the others and left them in peace.

Cain felt Hayden's grip tighten on her arm, drawing her attention from the coffin to him. "Shasta daisies were her favorite. Aunt Marie always said they made her happy." She stayed silent and listened. Hayden had been beside her when they went to identify her body at the morgue. Like his mother, Hayden had stoically and with a dry face shown the world the strength the Caseys possessed in abundance.

That her son was almost a carbon copy of her was a relief. A relief not to have to confront the image of his blond birth mother every single day. For Cain, to see any resemblance to the person she hated in the face of the one person she loved more than life would have been one penance too many.

She plucked a flower from the arrangement and handed it to him. "Keep one, son. We'll press it into one of the books she gave you."

"Mom?"

She cocked her head to the side to acknowledge his question.

"Would it be okay to cry now? Everyone's gone."

*God, it sucks to be a Casey heir*, she thought. The boy had tried to be strong, but in the end he was only a child. "Honey, of course it's okay to cry."

"It's okay for you too. No one'll see."

She put an arm around her son and a fist on the casket. How absurd that on such a rainy day the wood felt warm. She silently let a few tears fall. She held her son and cried for the injustices heaped in the road that marked her life.

When, eventually, Cain turned and signaled they were ready, the mantle of power was back in place. The time to grieve, along with all the other nightmares unleashed when her defenses were down, would have to come later. Now it was time to find those responsible for making this day possible. She knew who had put her sister here and vowed to make him suffer. It wouldn't be long before he got his own wooden box for his family to cry over.

From a distance the people Cain trusted with her family's lives tried to ignore the tears in their own eyes as they looked at the casket upon which their boss's hand rested. They all thought it was a good thing she had such broad shoulders, since the world expected so much of her. But they weren't the only ones watching. Parked farther up the drive, two vans with darkened windows were abuzz with shutter clicks. All of those in attendance as well as the family were photographed for later cataloguing.

The mantle Cain was born to and had inherited from her father was the reason for the huge amount of interest. Just as her friends had gone into their father's professions after college, she too had joined the family business. For her, however, it meant becoming the head of one of the most powerful crime families in New Orleans. The strong woman had a reputation for being vicious and hard, but she did have her Achilles's heel. He was walking by her side—Hayden Dalton Casey—her greatest gift and her only heir. She held the umbrella for both of them as she put her arm around her son and started back to the car.

"*Derby*?" said Merrick Runyon, Cain's personal bodyguard. "The padre has guts, I give him that. I haven't heard anyone except Marie call you that since your mother was alive." She opened the car door for them.

Before getting in the car, Cain glared at the vans parked not that far away and snarled in their direction. "You'd think they'd give it a rest, especially on a day like today. Fucking vulture bastards." She spoke loud enough so the mikes trained on her would pick up every word. With a deep breath she let go of the anger and turned to Merrick. "As to *Derby*, let's not get into that today. If my parents had met in Paris or somewhere else besides the Kentucky Derby, I wouldn't have had so much grief over my name."

"It's not that bad, Mom." Hayden bumped shoulders with her and smiled. His eyes were swollen from the crying he had done over his aunt, but he was obviously trying to cheer her up. "Want to watch a movie with me when we get home?"

"Sure, I could use a day off in front of the television."

"It won't be the same without Aunt Marie there, but we'll make it through. Maybe when all this stuff gets better you'll tell me what happened."

Cain put her arm around him and kissed his forehead. “Are you willing to give me some time, little man?”

“I trust you, so take all the time you need, but don’t forget I loved her too. I want to know who hurt her and why. I know she didn’t drive, so something else put those cuts and bruises all over her.”

Cain looked at her son and ran her fingers through his dark hair. “How’d you get to be so smart?”

“It’s the Casey genes floating to the top.”

She realized that her father’s old expression was coming back to haunt her, and despite the gloom outside the car window, she laughed. Hayden was right. She would eventually tell him what had happened to their beloved Marie.

Hayden was the rightful heir to the family business, just as she had been her father’s. And like hers, his education concerning the family business had started early. Hopefully, though, they would have more time together than she and her father had shared before circumstances stole him from her life. Hayden was eleven, but having been raised around adults, he was precocious and highly intelligent. He needed to learn what happened to those who hurt vulnerable innocents, especially when their name was Casey.

## CHAPTER TWO

Two months had passed since Marie's funeral, and summer had faded like the fallen magnolia blossoms into an early winter in the city along the Mississippi River. Life had slowly returned to normal. School helped Hayden with his grief, and work helped Cain do the same. Over dinner one night, when he brought the subject up again, she told him what had happened to Marie and to the man who had taken her from them.

At first she didn't know how to react to the grim face Hayden wore throughout her story, but all he wanted to know was if the guy was dead. She nodded, which he mirrored, and no other questions were necessary between them. It was the last time they had spoken of it, and she hoped the story had helped relieve his share of nightmares.

She thought of that night often, realizing Hayden had picked up on more than even she could imagine. Never evasive, she had wanted more time for him to enjoy being a child before the realities of life consumed his days.

Maybe it was all the time she spent with him, answering all his questions with infinite patience, that helped him think beyond his eleven years. Or maybe it was his insatiable need to know and his consumption of books in search of answers and things to share with her. Whatever the reason, she had ended up with a son who would be a brilliant man when his time came, and the thought never failed to put a smile of pride on her face.

Setting her coffee cup down, she put away her personal thoughts, got up from the table, and donned her jacket, signaling her shadows that she was ready to head to work. The car idled a few feet from the front

door, ready for the trip to her office in a local warehouse.

She owned two nightclubs, but spent most of her time in the building along the river her father had bought years before. The faded, chipped paint on the outer walls gave no clue to the posh offices inside.

What she did have a clue about was where every FBI and other government agency wiretap and bugging device was located within the walls of her offices and complexes. She irritated the agents no end when she often smiled and waved to the cameras. By now they had to know that for every device they garnered to perform the constant surveillance, someone was always willing to sell better equipment to find the nasty little bugs.

Merrick, the woman next to her, was adjusting the shoulder holster under her jacket, making her chest thrust toward Cain. She was tall, slim, African American, and one of the most beautiful women Cain had ever come across.

In a hand-to-hand fight with her employer, Merrick would lose. Anyone *else* who suspected her of any type of weakness soon found she was three times as deadly as Cain, because her boss used more restraint before ending someone's life. Usually Merrick didn't want the hassle of talking when action was quicker and, in most cases, more efficient. She had worked her way up the ranks by taking orders and keeping the Caseys' secrets until she was the one at Cain's side.

"What's on the plate today?" Cain asked.

"Could be me if you play your cards right."

Cain let her eyes stray to the all-too-tempting cleavage and sighed. "It's hard to turn down such a great offer, so don't forget it later when we're done here. Did you meet with Mook this morning before he left with Hayden for school?"

"Of course. Don't worry, sugar. I'm not letting anything happen to your boy or to you." She reached over and patted the inside of Cain's knee. "To answer your first question, your uncle Alex is waiting to see you. He wanted to talk to you sooner, but I told him the last couple of weeks weren't the best time. He wouldn't be put off any longer, so I figured you'd want to get this over with."

Alex Baxter, her mother's redheaded older brother, was the one person on that side of the family who had tried to act as a surrogate when Cain's father had been killed in a turf war fifteen years before. The same battle had taken her brother Billy and her mother three years

later, leaving her and Marie to pick up the pieces. Alex was the most socially acceptable of all the Baxter boys, but just barely.

“Did he say what he wanted?”

“No, just said it was important and it wasn’t family business.”

Merrick took Cain’s black coat and hat as soon as they cleared the door and handed them to Cain’s assistant. When she saw that Alex was alone, she took her usual seat outside Cain’s door.

“Cain, how are you?” Alex stood as if waiting for his niece to embrace him and just as quickly sat down when she bypassed him and sat behind her desk.

“I’m fine. Thanks for coming by to ask. If that’s all you want, we’ll have to cut this short. I had to postpone a lot of things to take Hayden on a short trip, and the paperwork piled up. As much as I love these little chats with you, I’m busy.”

“I told your trained pit bull outside I wanted to talk to you about something important, so surely you can spare me ten minutes.”

“Careful not to call her that to her face, uncle. She’s been known to bite for less. What’s so important you walked into the viper’s lair to talk to me about?” Cain relaxed into the leather chair and put a fist under her chin. She was grateful these little talks didn’t happen often, but they were annoying nonetheless.

“So much like your father, Cain. What my sister ever saw in that man, I’ll spend my life trying to figure out.” He shook his balding head, remembering the senior Casey and his sister’s adoring looks whenever he was within sight. Time and years of marriage hadn’t changed the way she felt about him or what she was willing to overlook.

“Considering you and Edith lived off his money, and still do to an extent, I’d think you’d talk about him with an iota more respect. I’ll tell you for the hundredth time to tread carefully when it comes to speaking ill of my father or of my mother’s choices.”

“No need to get mad.” Alex threw his hand up, starting in on his reason for coming. “I want to talk to you about someone close to you who recently called and asked me to soften the blow before they come to see you. Promise me you’ll listen before you end up smashing something.”

Cain ran her hand through her thick jet-black hair, trying to defuse her impatience with the annoyance taking up space in her office. It was always the same between them. He would blame her father and his family for her mother’s death, and she would get mad enough to

throw the windbag out. The only other time he became this much of a nuisance was when his monthly check was late.

“Either you spit out what you’ve got to say or get the fuck out.”

Before Alex could reprimand his niece for her language, the voice of one of Cain’s other uncles, Jarvis Casey, interrupted him from the open door. “Perhaps the person Alex is speaking of went to the wrong family member for help. They should’ve sent only the favorite uncle, instead of one from the side of the family you find extremely annoying.”

Jarvis’s teasing yet biting remark coaxed the first smile out of Cain that day. Her uncle Jarvis was the closest thing she’d ever get to watching her father, Dalton, grow old. Jarvis had been born a few years after Dalton, but in some of their childhood photos the brothers could have passed for twins, both fitting the clichéd tall, dark, and handsome description.

Alex studied the two as they said hello. Unlike the Baxter family, which produced a brood of short redheads, the Caseys had produced giants with dark looks and even darker blue eyes. It had been Dalton’s eyes, Therese had told him, that had captured her heart the first time she looked into them.

“Merrick,” Cain said into the intercom, “please come in here and show Alex to the door. We’re done.”

Alex followed Merrick out, knowing Cain’s dismissal was genuine. The Casey clan was an inner circle the Baxter side of the family would never crack.

Cain jumped up and hugged Jarvis as soon as her finger had released the intercom button.

“How you holding up, kid?” asked Jarvis.

“Trying to convince myself she’s gone, even though all this time has passed. Marie was an innocent. She didn’t deserve what happened to her.”

“You took care of your own, Cain. Don’t go doubting yourself now. It’s only been a few months, so cut yourself some slack. Walk across the street and buy an old man a cup of coffee, and I’ll tell you a tall tale, I will.”

The two strolled out, followed closely by Merrick and three other people. Under their assorted coats the four were wearing enough firepower to take out the entire block, if necessary. As backup, a team of ten guards looked on from the roof of the Casey warehouses. Each

of them had a legally registered high-powered rifle strapped to his shoulder.

“What’s up?” Cain cocked her head up from under the brim of her hat to give the telephoto lenses, always aimed at the warehouse to catch her in a misstep, a clear shot.

“Why do you always look up when you know they’re there?” Jarvis turned the brim of his own hat further down on his head.

“I figure the ladies in the jury pool will never convict me if I provide enough good-looking photos for them to study in the deliberation room.”

The joke made her uncle laugh and slap her on the back. “Ah, it’s nice to hear a little of that ego back. I missed it.” They walked across the street to a café where Cain ate lunch almost every day. “Your father loved coming in here for the eggs.”

“You left your house in this rain to tell me about my father and eggs?” Cain waved to the waitress, holding up two fingers before she pointed to the coffeepot.

“It could be I just wanted to see you.”

The finger tapping on the table clued Cain to the fact that something was bothering Jarvis. Once the waitress put down two cups mixed with the right amount of cream and sugar, Cain laid her hand flat on the Formica surface, ready to hear whatever was on her uncle’s mind. “What gives?”

“Emma called.”

Had Jarvis stood up and slapped her, he wouldn’t have gotten a more stunned response. Cain slid her hand away from the coffee cup and curled it into a fist at hearing the name. “What did she want?”

Jarvis lowered his head and played with the top of the wet hat resting on his lap. He’d consider himself lucky if the fist close to him on the table didn’t lift and strike him before he was finished. He felt like the room had become nearly glacial from the color and look in her eyes.

“She’s in town and wants to meet with you. I offered her my protection as long as she doesn’t try to contact Hayden without your permission. I’m not telling you what to do, kid, but you need to finish with this business.”

“There’s no business to finish, it’s done. She walked out, remember?”

“She went home...” said Jarvis.

“*This* was her home, and *our* life.” Cain’s voice rose an octave, and she slammed her fist on the table, making the salt shaker fall to the floor and break. “I know where she went, Uncle Jarvis. For Hayden’s sake, I know all about her. What does she *want*?”

Jarvis was surprised at the outburst since Cain was usually all about control when she was in public. He noticed that everyone else in the diner went about their business as if the two of them were sitting in a soundproof box.

“Just a chat, Cain. Then you’re done.” Jarvis put his hands up in an effort to calm her down. He knew he was taking a chance, but he thought it was the best decision for all of them in the long run. He was willing to gamble anything for Cain to be happy.

Cain turned in her chair and addressed Merrick. “Call Mook now. Tell him no detours today, straight home, and he doesn’t open the door unless it’s one of us. Any fuckups on this one and it’ll be his last.”

Merrick didn’t ask why. She just pulled her phone out and relayed the message to the big blond who was in charge of Hayden’s personal security.

Cain glared at Jarvis. “Tell Emma to meet me at the Erin Go Braugh at one o’clock. She’s got twenty minutes. And next time, uncle, never pick someone else’s loyalties above your family’s. If you learned anything from my father, besides what foods he liked to order, it should’ve been that.”