

THE DEVIL UNLEASHED

by
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CHAPTER ONE

Fuck!” Merrick Runyon said, slamming the phone down. Blue, the manager of the club Emerald’s, had called to tell her about the explosion that had just destroyed it. If she had to guess, mob boss Giovanni Bracato had thrown the first punch in the upcoming war. With his sons and grandson back in his possession, Giovanni wasn’t wasting any time on exacting revenge.

The tall, slim African American woman leapt from the desk chair in Derby Cain Casey’s home office, the clanging alarm system making her dive to the floor and start crawling. As soon as she opened the door, the wall of Cain’s first-floor office erupted with gunfire. Screams rang from every corner of the house as soon as the firing began, which, judging from the spray of bullets, wasn’t going to end any time soon. Outside, three of the six men stationed on the wall had to be dead for anyone to get this kind of access to the back of the house.

The gunfire seemed to be concentrated on the office and the bedrooms. With the safety of a few walls between her and the outside of the house, Merrick ran up the stairs. If something happened to Cain’s family on her watch, she’d never find anyplace on earth to hide. She gripped her Glock 9 mm as she sprinted down the hall to the rooms where Hayden, Emma, and Hannah Casey had been sleeping.

“Emma,” Merrick yelled as she ran.

A huge wave of relief washed over her as Hayden stepped into the hall in just a pair of jeans. She pushed the twelve-year-old to the ground and continued to the room next door, where she found Emma and five-year-old Hannah cowering in the middle of the room in front

of the bed. Without thinking, she dashed in, grabbed them both by the collar, and dragged them into the hall. The windows were history and the wall looked like swiss cheese, but they were safe.

Merrick pointed at Hayden. "Stay here, I mean it."

They would be safe in the middle of the house on the second floor unless the idiots outside planned to use some sort of missile as a big finish to the colossally stupid move they had already made by opening fire on Cain's house, especially with her family at home.

From her vantage point at a window in the back of the house, Merrick could see two cars and a utility truck with the rear basket in the up position in the street. The man in the basket, holding an Uzi and what seemed like an endless supply of clips, was covering the two men who'd scaled the wall. The cars were inching forward with the back doors open, waiting for the climbers to hit the sidewalk.

Thankfully, reinforcements had arrived, and more of Cain's guards were returning fire. Merrick jerked the window open and aimed for the driver of the first car, keeping her finger on the trigger until she emptied the clip. The car drifted to the sidewalk and crashed into a vehicle parked on the street. The attackers jumped out and joined their allies in the second vehicle, but not before Cain's men took out another three of them. After Merrick rammed another clip into the gun, she shot the guy in the utility truck in the head, and the driver sped away, the basket still raised.

An almost eerie silence followed as the car raced after the truck toward town. Emma Casey sat clutching both of her children, almost in shock as she waited for Merrick to come back and tell her what was going on. She hadn't been out of town long enough to forget what the alarm from the men guarding the house meant. When the thing had gone off she had grabbed Hannah and hit the floor out of pure instinct, Cain's warnings ringing in her ears from years before.

"Mama, what's happening?" Her daughter sounded terrified, and Emma could feel her shaking from the abrupt awakening. Hannah pressed her small hands against her ears as if they hurt from all the noise.

"It's all right, Hannah. Merrick and the rest of Mom's men will make it all right," Hayden answered for her. "There's just some bad people outside, but they won't hurt us."

“Emma, get the kids dressed and ready to move.”

The order came from the top of the stairs where Merrick stood. She breathed deeply, as if to center herself, as she jammed the gun back into its shoulder holster. “I have to call the cops, and I don’t want you here if I can help it.”

“You mean they aren’t on the way after all this?”

“Before we let anyone on these grounds, I have to look around.”

“Hayden, go get ready, and take Hannah with you,” Emma said.

Hannah, however, clung to her.

“Please, Hannah, go with your brother and I’ll be right in.”

Emma and Merrick stared at each other until the door to Hayden’s room clicked closed.

“Who was out there, Merrick?”

“Some idiots who’re going to regret their parents ever met once I tell Cain what happened today.”

Emma ran her hand through her hair and closed her eyes for a long moment. “I want to go see Cain.”

“Why?” In the last few days Merrick had grown to like Cain’s wife, but she was about to see what Emma was made of. Merrick was afraid her boss was about to get screwed again.

“Whatever I need to see her about is between the two of us, Merrick. It’s a family matter and really none of your business.”

“You’re right. I work for Cain and can’t pry or make decisions for her, but I’d spend the time until we get to the hospital thinking about what you’re going to say. Cain’s willing to give you just so many chances. Then not even the Virgin Mary will get you back where you want to be.” Merrick tapped her finger against her temple. “Just some food for thought.”

Pausing halfway down the stairs, she shouted back up to Emma. “Finish getting dressed and don’t come out until I come get you. I’ve got a few things to do before we can even think about moving to the hospital, so be a little patient.”

Emma watched Merrick take the rest of the steps two at a time. *She’s right, Emma. You cut and run now, and it’s over.* She wasn’t going to run away again, but was it fair to raise children in a house where they could get killed just for sleeping in their own beds? Surprisingly, the voice in her head that asked the question sounded a lot like her mother’s, and for

once it didn't sound all that unreasonable. A responsible person would have been on the first flight out of town, consequences be damned.

Behind her Hayden opened the door, fully dressed and holding Hannah's hand. "You want to leave now, don't you?"

"I'm not going anywhere without you, sweetheart."

Hayden pulled back as Emma reached out. "Just so you know I won't live anywhere without Mom. I want to be with Hannah, but not at the expense of my mother."

"We don't have to talk about this now."

"Merrick's right, you know, and I hope you listen to her. If you walk away again Mom might not let you come back. If you do go, I'm staying here with her, just so you know."

Emma was stunned. "Like I said, we don't have to talk about anything right now."

"I heard you, but I just want you to know that before we get to the hospital."

Emma didn't have any idea what she would say when she visited Cain.



Three dead strangers sprawled on the sidewalk, and another lolled in the front seat of the abandoned car. When Merrick snapped her fingers, two of her men removed anything that would identify them. As Cain's personal bodyguard and the head of her security forces, she had to make sure they carried out a thorough investigation before the cops arrived. She strode to the car, pushed the guy over, and jerked out his wallet before going to the passenger side and removing all the papers in the glove box.

One of her men shoved everything they found into a bag and hurried back toward the house in case the police were on a quicker schedule than they planned for. Then another pulled out a digital camera and snapped pictures of the remnants of the men's faces.

"Make copies and don't come back until I know who paid them. Whoever finds the ones who got away will get a big bonus in his paycheck this week. Now get moving." Merrick stalked to the front door.

Sirens sounded in the distance, probably responding to a dozen

emergency calls from the neighbors. Merrick figured they mostly thought it was kind of cool to live next door to such an infamous personality—until the ugliness of Cain’s life landed on their doorstep so dramatically. She shook her head and headed inside. For the rest of the day she would have to answer questions and prove she and her men had acted in self-defense. From the kitchen she made two phone calls to speed up the process.

“Muriel, I need you at the house as soon as you can get here. We have a situation, and I don’t want it to get out of control. And I sure don’t want the police to use it to broaden the scope of the investigation that’ll begin in about two minutes.”

Muriel Casey sat up in her office chair and tapped her fingers on the mahogany desk, a gift from her cousin Cain when she’d graduated from LSU Law School. “What’s the situation?”

“Someone blew up Emerald’s before coming over here and shooting up the back of the house.”

When Merrick explained, she sounded like she was ordering lunch, but Muriel knew better. Later, Merrick would decompress over a stiff drink, but now she had to keep her head.

“Anyone hurt?” Before Merrick could answer, something else occurred to Muriel. “Wait, if you were at the house, that means Emma and the kids were with you. God, tell me there isn’t a scratch on them.”

“They’re fine, physically anyway. I’m afraid the trauma may frighten away our little blond bird, but I don’t have time to think about that. I’m going to call Agent Daniels next. We have enough trouble trying to keep the locals at bay, so maybe for once the feds will come in handy.”

Muriel stopped tapping her fingers and flattened her hand on the cool wooden surface. “I’m not saying that’s a bad idea, but hold off on that call. Get Emma and the kids out of there for now and over to the hospital. Cain will want to see them all as soon as possible, just for peace of mind.”

“I think we should phone the feds now, Muriel. This has someone else’s fingerprints all over it, since I don’t believe Giovanni can be this stupid. I say we turn them in to the proper authorities and let them give us a head start on the investigation.”

“I’ll make the call after I talk with Cain, but only when you’re out

of the house. After all, Cain's the one who says you should live with your blinds open every so often, even when you should be locking the doors. Shows whoever's watching you that you aren't dirty."

On her end, Merrick twirled a paring knife between her fingers, trying to temper her desire to plunge it into someone's chest. "Do you think it's a good idea for me to leave? Won't the police wonder where I've gone? I'll look like I'm running from something."

"You'll look like you're trying to protect the people you're hired to protect. I know who we're dealing with, my friend, so I can only imagine the damage they've left behind. No one's going to blame you for trying to keep Emma and the children safe. If the police need to talk to you, they'll do it with me in the room. It's not like they won't know how to find you."

Muriel stood and buttoned her jacket. "Get moving, and I'll deal with everything. After all, that's my part of the job. Oh, make sure we have the gun permits handy, and everyone's license to carry them all the time. Having those might get me out of there before midnight."

"Call me if you need anything else."

"Merrick, that's my line."

Merrick grimaced, afraid that when Cain heard about this episode, she might want to stick a knife in her.

CHAPTER TWO

“My God. What’s wrong? Is Cain okay?” Emma said when she saw the startled expression of the hospital administrator who met them and their protection in the lobby. It had never occurred to her that Cain might be in danger, since she was always the one who kept everyone safe. If someone had attacked Cain in her vulnerable state, Emma didn’t know if she would be able to endure it.

“Please, Ms. Casey, I didn’t mean to scare you. Everything’s fine. Your partner just wanted me to escort you to her new private room.” The administrator waved toward a bank of elevators.

As Emma, the children, Merrick, and Mook, Hayden’s longtime bodyguard, rode to the sixth floor, Emma felt immensely better that they had a contingent of armed guards in the lobby. She imagined an assassin around every corner and jumped every time she heard a noise.

Considering all she’d been through in the last couple of months, Cain looked amazing. Being shot two weeks earlier by Agent Barney Kyle on her enemy Giovanni Bracato’s order hadn’t been the only thing that had taken its toll. She’d been dealing with the return of her partner Emma after a four-year absence, and the discovery of their daughter Hannah. Those emotional blows had been hard, especially since she was still grieving the murder of her sister Marie.

Now, though, there was no sign of the pallor that lingered since Agent Kyle shot her. She sat up in a chair talking to Lou, freshly showered, appearing like the Cain Casey all of them were used to dealing with. She still looked a little tired and on edge, but the strength that always seemed to pour from her was returning.

“Ah, now there’s a good-looking group,” Cain said, seeming surprised to see Emma.

When Cain nodded, everyone whose last name wasn’t Casey left the room. Without any encouragement, Hannah ran to Cain and started climbing into her lap.

“Careful, honey. Cain’s got an owie and we don’t want to make it worse,” Emma said. She moved to pick the little girl up but stopped when Cain shook her head brusquely.

“It’s all right. Let her do what she wants. I feel better after a shower.”

“Was that wise? You’re still weak. And what about your sutures?”

“Don’t worry. A big guy from the ward helped me since you weren’t here. And they wrapped me up fairly tight before I got wet.” Cain waved Emma off and opened her hand to her daughter. “How are you doing after all that excitement this afternoon, sweet girl?”

“It was scary, Mom,” Hannah said, her fingers in her mouth.

“I know, sweetheart, but you’re going to be all right. Nothing bad’s going to happen to you, your mom, or your brother.” She stroked Hannah’s thick black hair and kissed her forehead. “I promise. Want something to drink?”

“Can I have a Coke?”

“What do you say, Emma, just this once?” Cain looked at her.

“Just one, Hannah, and you have to stay with Hayden the whole time.” Emma helped her off Cain’s lap and walked her and Hayden to the door. The sight of them following Mook down the hall made her heart hurt.

“Are you all right?” Cain asked as the door closed.

“Two carloads of men came and shot up the room where I was sleeping with our daughter and destroyed the room where you sit day after day working. Am I all right?” Emma’s voice grew louder with each sentence, and Cain didn’t try to stop her. “No, I’m not all right.” The controlled veneer she’d put up for the sake of the children disappeared in a second as she twirled around to face Cain.

“Can I ask you something else?” Cain put up her hand this time when Emma opened her mouth. “Just be quiet and think about what I’m asking before you answer.”

“What?”

“When you first met me, did you ask anyone who I was before you went out on our first date?” They had come a long way from that first night at the Erin Go Braugh, an Irish pub Cain owned in the French Quarter. That first date had blossomed into a relationship that had produced two children, but also the betrayal of Emma leaving.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

Cain stared at her and tried to appear relaxed, though she was convinced that Emma would leave her again. And this time would be the last. “It has everything to do with everything.”

“I knew you were the owner of the pub and people had a million stories to tell about your women and what you did for a living. It was just all rumors, but I didn’t go out and ask anyone about you specifically. Why?”

“Because I want to know if you knew me before you entered the devil’s lair, Emma. No one forced you, so don’t act like you think I was some saint who deceived you into a life you didn’t want. Do you regret leaving the farm this time around?”

“Of course I don’t regret coming back, but I love my children and want them to be safe.”

“Come on, then, let’s be done with it.” With considerable effort Cain put her hands on the arms of the chair and pushed herself into a standing position. “Keep your place.” Cain swayed a little, but didn’t want any help from Emma. “I’ll be keeping my feet and dignity as you tell me what you want.”

“I want you—”

“But. It sounds like you wanted to end that statement with a ‘but,’ sweetling.”

“I can’t live like this. It’s not you. I love you more than life, but we have to consider other people. Yes, I knew who you were before I committed to you, and I thought I could handle it, but I just want to keep us all safe. Is that wrong?”

The pain was starting to come in short aching throbs again, and it wasn’t just from the wound. Cain dug deep to stay on her feet. “This time I didn’t set myself up with unrealistic expectations of you, Emma, so I’m not disappointed. If you want to go, then go.”

“Cain, please—”

“I won’t stand in your way. You want to leave, you leave, no questions asked and no tearful farewells. But—yes, I can add those to

the ends of sentences too—you won't take my children if they don't want to leave. I won't keep you from them, Emma, but that works both ways. You won't keep them from me either. I'm sure, being the only parent Hannah's ever known, she'll choose you, but if Hayden wants to stay, I won't send him away."

"Even if he could get hurt? He and Hannah could be dead right now. All that shooting—"

"Take off your blinders, Emma. You're standing here alive because my people did their jobs. You think people like Barney Kyle are going to keep you safe? Do you think I'll just hand over my kids to someone like your mother?"

"Forget my mother, and Kyle. I learned my lesson about trusting people like him. I just want us all to go somewhere until you're healthy and ready to take on what you need to, to make all this go away. You're a parent, Cain. Don't you want that for Hannah and Hayden?"

"I see it as running, and so will Bracato's men. Do you think Giovanni and his sons will show mercy until I'm ready to fight back? What you're asking will only put us in more danger. This is the life I've chosen, hard realities and all. Just because you can't take the heat, you don't have the right to use our children to try and guilt me into seeing things your way. Just get out."

As much as she wanted to stay on her feet, Cain had to either sit down or fall on the floor. "I don't have the energy to deal with all this shit and you along with it. Go back to the farm and to Mama, and tell her how she was right all along. We'll make arrangements as soon as you're settled."

"Please, Cain, we need to finish this."

"I said for you to leave. It's what you're good at, and I see it still comes naturally to you. Just tell Merrick where you're going."

"You want to know where I'll be?" Emma took a step forward.

"Of course I want to know where you'll be, since Hannah will be with you. I won't keep Hayden from you, but Hannah has a right to know me."

"Of course—"

Cain pinned Emma with a glare. "Get out. We're done."

Emma had hurt her for the last time.