

**DEAL
WITH THE
DEVIL**

by
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CHAPTER ONE

St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans, Louisiana

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.” Derby Cain Casey knelt in a confessional in St. Louis Cathedral. She was the last one for the early morning session and smiled as she uttered the lines her mother had patiently taught her. So much had happened to her, those lessons seemed like they had occurred in another lifetime.

She’d lost Emma, her partner, to a misunderstanding. But after a four-year separation she had not only gotten her back, but gained a daughter. This time around, they had understood each other completely when she had methodically killed every single male member of the Bracato family as revenge for the deaths of her parents, brother Billy, and sister Marie. Emma was no longer blind to who Cain was and what the family business was. This time around she’d gladly made a deal with the devil in exchange for a life with Cain and their children, Hayden and Hannah.

Even in the shadows of the confessional Cain could see her old friend Bishop Andrew Goodman press his fingers to his chin.

“Do you know it’s a sin to say things you don’t mean to a priest?”

“It’s a sin to ask for forgiveness?”

“Not at all. It’s just the sins yet to come that make me worry about you, especially if I believe everything I read in the papers.” He was referring to the series of articles about what had happened to Giovanni Bracato and his four sons. With no bodies for evidence, the police could only speculate.

“I’d argue with you, but what’d be the point?” Cain laughed when she saw him smile. “Since there’s a good chance I’m going to sin again, how about you let me up and we’ll go for a walk. We’ll save my laundry list of wrongdoings for next time.”

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She genuflected more out of habit than deep faith before they left the confines of the safe zone the listeners in her life had ignored.

In the vestibule, Andrew went through the ritual of getting down to his unpretentious black pants and shirt and white collar. Though he'd been the bishop of St. Louis for over a decade, people who didn't know him still mistook him for just a parish priest. Andrew had grown up without the trappings of wealth, making his vows easy to abide by.

From the day Cain had accepted his invitation to come by for a talk, they had met regularly. While they would never be friends like Andrew and Cain's father Dalton had been, they were growing closer. Not having to hide any part of herself in Andrew's office and in his company comforted Cain. That rare luxury had made her look forward to their talks, especially today.

"If you aren't sinning then what have you been up to?"

Andrew dropped into his favorite chair. His hair had turned white and had thinned some, but he still moved like a man in his twenties.

"I've actually been building bridges." Cain accepted the cup of tea he offered her.

"That was one of your father's strongest traits. 'Never give up what you believe, Andy, but it's good to have friends when it counts,'" he said, trying to imitate Dalton's deep, booming voice. "He'd tell me that all the time."

"Da was right about that. Sometimes we seek alliances to help build our business, and sometimes to achieve our goals."

"And others are for survival," Andrew finished for her. "At the foot of what bridge do you find yourself, Derby?"

Cain liked Andrew to call her by her first name. He was the only one left who even remembered it, and it made her feel connected to the past and to her family.

"I'm beginning to think I'm a dinosaur in the modern world." She laughed because, even if she did do things the old-fashioned way, she didn't care. "Vices are a little different these days."

"Sometimes evolution isn't all it's cracked up to be."

Cain nodded once in agreement. "But if I don't evolve, I'll become obsolete, like the horse and buggy."

"But if you were Amish, you wouldn't need anything but a horse and buggy. You can expand into things that will make you untouchable, but my job is to save your soul."

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“Conquest doesn’t inspire my soul, you know that, but, for the safety of my family, it’s time to expand. With Ramon and his family I can achieve that goal without having to sacrifice who I am.”

Andrew put his cup down and bit into a peanut butter cookie his assistant had brought in. “So you do plan to sin again.”

“I plan to try a couple of new things, and if there’s sin involved I promise not to venture too much farther off the path than I have already.”

They both laughed at her version of confession.

“Why Ramon and not Vincent? Vincent is who your father picked.”

“My family is different than the family I grew up in. Da set an example that I like to think I’m living up to. Ramon is a better fit for what I want to leave Hayden and Hannah.”

“That goal’s appropriate for today. It’s good to celebrate his life by marking the day of his death. But to live the honorable life he taught you truly validates what Dalton stood for.” Andrew stood and waved her up. “Let’s go for that walk you promised me.”

Outside, Lou and two more men waited by Cain’s car, and he lifted his hand in greeting when he spotted Andrew. They headed uptown, and Cain glanced back once and laughed when she saw the new paneled van with the black-tinted windows two cars behind them.

“Your friends are being rather conspicuous these days. Isn’t that stressful?”

Cain ran her hand along her upper thigh before bringing it to her lips as a request for Andrew to stop talking. He was right, but with the stepped-up surveillance after she and Emma had returned from Wisconsin with their children, every conversation out in the open could potentially be used against her, no matter how many countermeasures she put in place. The suspicion that someone had destroyed Giovanni and his sons had swarmed the feds like someone stomping on a mound of fire ants.

The car stopped across the street from the famous Commander’s Palace restaurant, and Lou jumped from the front seat to grab the door for them. For years the Brennan family had served culinary masterpieces on one side of the street, while on the other a ten-foot brick fence stood sentry around the Lafitte Cemetery where the Casey family had been laid to rest.

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“It’s been years but I still miss the sound of Dalton’s voice,” Andrew said. “Are you bringing the family out today?”

“Later on, when Hayden gets out of school. He never knew my father, but he likes bringing flowers for Marie.” Cain unlocked the door of the crypt and stepped in. Slowly she ran her hand along Dalton’s name on his grave marker. The date was in early March exactly fourteen years ago, but the pain of losing him was etched into her soul as it was in the stone.

“Derby, you have to let go of your guilt.”

“We all have our crosses to bear, don’t we, Father? This is mine, and I’ve done some things to ease the hurt of loss. But I’m afraid the guilt is eternal. There really isn’t any rest for the wicked.”

“Do you think that’s what Dalton would’ve wanted for you? To live half a life by holding back from your partner and your children?”

“I’ve learned my lessons about holding back, don’t worry. My family is the most important thing in my life, but I haven’t forgotten the family I’ve lost.”

She pressed her hand harder into the stone and he stood back. “You still blame yourself for all the names in here, don’t you?”

“Why wouldn’t I? Giovanni isn’t that good,” she said, carefully emphasizing the present tense. Little slipups like that could sink her.

“Do you think you were just negligent?”

“My father was a surprise, but the others...” She moved her fingers over her mother’s name, then her brother’s, and made a fist when she got to Marie’s. “They were my responsibility. My father expected me to keep them safe.” It had taken some time, but Cain had enlarged the crypt to make room for Marie’s body, and even though she still hurt from her loss, that she was back among those who loved her most in life brought Cain comfort. And it’d been easier for Hayden this time around with Emma and Hannah there as they interred Marie again.

Andrew moved closer and placed one of his hands over her head. “May the Lord bring you peace then, because now they are His responsibility. Take care of your family, Derby, and the rest will take care of itself. Your father was like a brother to me, and I’d bet my eternal soul he doesn’t blame you for any of it. The one to blame isn’t of consequence anymore, so pay attention to the people who love you. I’m sure you’ll keep them whole.”

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“Thank you.” From her breast pocket she pulled a flask full of Dalton’s favorite whiskey. She passed it to Andrew first, took a sip after him, then poured the rest over Dalton’s grave stone. “To you, Da. Rest, knowing that I’m almost done.”

“God bless you then,” Andrew said as he moved his hand to her back.

“Be careful with your blessings, Father Andy. I’ve warned you before of my intentions to sin again.”

“I’m also smart enough to know my flock, and like God, I have infinite patience to wait for you to find your way. The Lord loves even black sheep, Derby.”

“The devil has a liking for us as well,” she said as the prepaid cell phone in her pocket chirped.

It signaled an incoming text message of only one word that normally could hold a multitude of meaning, but for Cain it meant the Bracatos were that much closer to being a memory only a few would bother with. The word “DONE” meant another batch of Giovanni’s henchmen on the street had shared his fate.

Some of Giovanni’s foremen had tried to start their own businesses after his disappearance and had moved in on some of the storeowners Cain did business with. Cain had been willing to ignore them, but a couple of the storeowners had been attacked and one had been killed for their non-cooperation with the new entrepreneurs.

Once they’d gone after the people who depended on her for protection, she’d started taking the trash off the streets. All the kills weren’t hers, but after she’d retaliated, no one had invaded her territory. With that situation resolved, she could plan something that would give the feds a show they wouldn’t soon forget.

“I’m sure my wife and my beloved mother hope you’re right when it comes to heaven and black sheep.” She put the cell back in her pocket and pointed to the gate. “But for now you’ll have to keep praying for the sinner I am.”

CHAPTER TWO

Key West, Florida

The dragon soared to the top of the hill again, sending a stream of fire down on the dark knight's shield and igniting the wheat fields around him to a roaring blaze. The head encased within the armor was drenched in sweat, making the beast harder to see, but he wasn't ready to surrender and take cover. With sword upraised he spied his opening to vanquish the evil serpent when—

Beep. Beep. Beep.

Remington Jatibon reached out and quieted the Blackberry sitting on the cooler, then read the message on the screen.

Time to go, great knight. Your kingdom awaits and there are dragons to slay.

“Damn, and I just got to the part where they actually used the word ‘vanquish.’”

The curse shattered the peaceful atmosphere created by the waves gently lapping on the shoreline. Remi punched in a phone number, and reality invaded her haven under the umbrella. “How far out are you, Simon? Your timing absolutely sucks, by the way.”

Simon Jimenez, the Cuban-born middle-aged woman who served as Remi's main bodyguard, spoke. “The day you tell me one of the flying lizards actually wins, I'll leave you alone. We're five minutes out, so start walking to the landing pad. Juno's waiting at the airport in Key West with your itinerary for the next couple of days, and it's not looking pretty.”

From her seat on the private island, Remi trained her eyes to the east, trying to spot the approaching helicopter. The island, just a patch of sand and some palm trees a few miles south of Key West, was one of her favorite spots.

Instead of getting ready, Remi sat back in the chair, pulled another beer from the cooler, and gazed out over the blue-green water. She

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wanted a final respite before the itinerary her assistant Juno had put together kicked in.

“I thought I told you to start walking?” Simon asked fifteen minutes later.

“And I thought you worked for me, Simon?”

“That would explain your signature on my paycheck. Just remember to tell Juno who delayed us, because I’m not taking the blame again. Why can’t you go to Palm Springs like everybody else? The travel arrangements would be easier,” Simon stepped close to Remi’s chair, holding her hand up to shield her face from the sun.

“If I was like everybody else, your life would be infinitely boring. Besides, we aren’t late. The reception isn’t until tonight, so relax and have a beer.”

“Your brother called and wants to review the casino contract again before the meeting. He called Cain, your father, and even Muriel Casey for a sit-down this afternoon.”

“Once this thing is done I’ll treat you to a bottle of champagne.” Remi took a sip of beer and slowly faced her. “Come on, old girl, let’s see what else hell can dredge up for us today.”

Simon’s smile faltered and she pointed at Remi. “Watch it. Don’t tempt the fates.”

“It’s what I live for, Simon. It’s what I live for.”

New Orleans, Louisiana

“Are you sure?”

“Today, baby,” Emma said after she drank a little of her juice. Her usual cup of coffee was absent.

Emma and Cain had been back in New Orleans for two months, living with Jarvis and Muriel Casey again while the contractor finished repairing their house. As Cain had promised, their life had returned to normal after they’d returned from Wisconsin, or as normal as life with Cain ever got.

The one thing hard to miss was the FBI surveillance that had been stepped up from the moment Cain had hit their radar again. The invasion of privacy aggravated Emma, but the authorities were still wondering what had happened to the Bracato family, so Cain had warned her in advance what to expect.

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“Today?” Cain asked again as she pushed away from the table.

“If you’ve got something else planned, then I suggest you reschedule.” Emma leaned back in her chair and tried to sound menacing. When Cain chuckled she realized she’d failed.

“Would you think less of me if I told you I’m scared?”

Emma laughed along with her. “I’m sure you’re quaking in your shorts.”

“Are you questioning your ability to make me quake in my shorts, lass?” Cain put her hand on her chest and widened her eyes.

“I just don’t want to waste the opportunity, love.”

Before Emma finished her statement, Cain had risen from her seat and dropped to her knees next to her. “You can’t think I’m not going with you. I’ve been waiting for this day from the second we talked about it. I love you and I’m ready.”

“I was just teasing you, honey. If anything, I’m enjoying my final days of you letting me lift my own glass.” Emma put her hands on Cain’s cheeks, then kissed her. “So are you free at ten?”

“Since my buddy, Dr. Casey, gave me a call and told me not to be late, I’ll be there.”

“Want to go upstairs and do everything we can to relax before our appointment?” Emma kissed her again. “Mook just left with the kids.”

“Then come with me, Mrs. Casey.” Cain stood and offered her hands. “Relaxation is my specialty.”

“Cain?” Katlin Patrick, Cain’s cousin and guard, stopped at the door of the dining room. “Sorry to interrupt.”

“What’s up?”

“Ramon called to remind you about today’s meeting.”

Cain glanced down at Emma before turning to Katlin. “Call him back and tell him today is out. Muriel can handle our end of things.”

Emma rested a hand on Cain’s chest and exercised her new partnership with Cain. “Katlin, please tell him if the meeting is after one this afternoon, Cain will be happy to be there.” She patted Cain’s chest when she felt her take a breath to start speaking. “We’ll be done by then, and I’ll be happy to nap while you’re out.”

“Call him then, and don’t bother us unless the house is on fire.”

“True, honey, you have other fires to start,” Emma said as she slipped her hand into the front of Cain’s pants to lead her upstairs.