

The

DEVIANS

Baby

by Carol Mercado



e Devil's Baby



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This book is a work of fiction. Any similarity to persons living or dead is purely coincidental and exists solely in the reader's mind.

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Prologue



Book One

I

Daybreak was more than two hours away in the city, and the atmosphere hung dank and heavy from the rainstorm that ended before midnight. Noxious fumes, belching from the scores of towering factory smokestacks, sent ashen clouds billowing high into the sky, casting more of an ominous pall over the city. The gloom was broken only by a few glistening beams of moonlight that penetrated through the thick gray veil.

Shadowy configurations moved steadily about the labyrinth of intersecting arteries: along the miles of dusky streets, on the unending railways, up and down the wide and narrow branch of the river, and out on the Great Lake. Cacophonous sounds swelled and ebbed: the sporadic sounds of steamship whistles blowing, streetcar bells clanging, trains puffing, and extraneous engines revving. Activity throughout the city, although more subdued because of the early hour, was ongoing.

Along Halsted Street, awnings on the storefronts were rolled up, and except for an occasional light, deep inside, most of the buildings that lined each side of the street, block after block, appeared dark.

Horse hooves, clip-clopping on the brick pavement, resonated, and wheels squeaked and ground as some horse-drawn wagons with early morning deliveries made their way up and down the dimly lit street, passing in and out of the sporadic stretches of the

streetlamps' glow. Bells chimed faintly in the distance as two men stepped from the shadows to wait on the corner by the tall, cement lamppost for the streetcar. Both had dark work clothes, heavy boots, and black lunch buckets in hand and were quite likely on their way to the first shift at a factory or Union Stock Yard. They gawked and craned their necks when a long, shiny, black carriage, led by a sleek, black, high-stepping horse, emerged from the crossing at Taylor Street and turned north. The horse-and-carriage proceeded up Halsted Street at a brisk pace.

The black horse dropped its pace, slowing for a wood-planked wagon pulled by a long-legged, gray horse. A shimmying, smoking, square-nosed motor truck came up fast from behind and drove around them, leaving its cumulous gassy fumes clinging to the misty air. The delivery driver grumbled and reined the horse and wagon to the curb in front of a store. He yanked at the long chain on the roll bar, signaling the shopkeeper he had arrived. The swinging bell rang loudly. Lights popped on inside the store. Stepping back to a trot, the black horse broke through a wide puddle. Muddy water gushed erratically in the carriage's wake.

At the middle of an upcoming block, four, broad, muscular, white horses swerved a long, flat, red delivery wagon parallel to the curb and came to a halt. Heavy, silver cylinders of draft beer were lined perpendicular along both sides of the wagon. The man inside the saloon quickly looped the strap of his work apron over his head, tied the long strings in the back, and hurried outside to help unload the wagon. They conversed in low mumbling voices at the curb. The driver and his helper leaped down from the wagon. The helper lifted a hand truck off the side of the wagon. The saloonkeeper pointed to the passing carriage. The other two nodded and quickly made the sign of the cross.

Nearing the upcoming intersection, the black horse began to slow. The driver brought the horse-and-carriage to an abrupt stop at a street crossing and waited for the streetcar to move before turning down the side street.

A man exited from the rear doors, and the streetcar rushed

noisily down the street. The man hesitated at the corner, seeing a carriage was about to make the turn onto the side street, and moved back to the curb. He reverently tipped the brim of his hat and stood attentively, waiting for the black hearse to pass.

The driver, who was garbed in a black morning coat and a flat-crowned, broad-brimmed hat and seated high up in the carriage, did not react. The man watched curiously while the horse-and-carriage made an immediate turn into the alley behind the tall pillared, red brick mansion.

The alley, though brick-paved and swept far better than most for the area, wasn't well lit. It was empty and quiet, so the sound of horse hooves was heightened, as was the creaking noise from the carriage, passing between the settlement house buildings to one side and stables to the other. Some stables along the alley were open, but those with doors were tightly secured by wooden crossbars. Inside two open stables, were motorcars, carefully covered with well-worn blankets.

The driver called out, "Whoa boy," and gave a gentle tug to the reins. The horse responded instinctively and brought the carriage to a halt at the middle of the alley in front of a coach house. The driver set the reins and sat silently for a few moments, staring blankly.

A subtle glow from the streetlamp accentuated the furrows on the man's long, angular face and made him look rather dour. His cheeks were sunken, and his complexion was sallow, almost yellow. Big blackheads were embedded along his prominent cheekbones and the rims of his nostrils, and his long, aquiline nose ended with a slight hook. His lips were thin, almost negligible. His eyes were close together and fairly deep set. The color was undeterminable; hazel perhaps, however, his left eye looked blue and his right eye looked brown.

"Shore a busy night," he sighed. He felt very fatigued from working all night. He rubbed his eyes with the back of his fist and blinked hard a couple of times; which seemed to make the irritation better. Opening his mouth wide, he sucked in a long deep breath and let out a loud, protracted, "ahhhh, ahhhh-ah," then shuddered

and shook his head vigorously, trying to rid himself of the weariness.

He placed his hat on the seat. His hat, damp around the headband, left a noticeable indentation along his forehead. He swept his fingers through his coarse hair and scratched at the back of his head. His hair was completely gray and greasy, and an incorrigible cowlick stuck straight up at the back of his crown.

“Huh?” he snorted, rubbing at the itchy, gray stubble along his jaw. “Miss Murray shore wasn’t her usual self tonight.”

He’d always known Miss Murray to be calm, serene, and in control. This time, however, there was an unusual intensesness in her voice when she telephoned.

“Daniel, I want you to come right away,” she said. —“And, I want you to come alone,” she added emphatically.

‘Sounded just short of a demand,’ he mused. ‘Hadn’t heard from her in a while. Thought she was takin’ her business elsewhere.’

Normally, Josh came along. He was on the other two earlier pickups that evening, so when Daniel tried to explain he’d need to have his helper, a sharp “No!” was the answer. Miss Murray wouldn’t hear of it. Though from what she told him, Daniel concluded he would be able to accommodate her request alone.

Daniel had been called to the settlement house many times over the years, so he was quite familiar with what he had to do. Usually, he opened the long, wooden, double-gates and backed the carriage right up to the rear of the building to pick up the bodies. The small, rectangular, russet brick structure, a one-story addendum that jutted out from the back of the two-story medical building, was built as an afterthought. The medical building took up two city lots.

He glanced around. “Aw, hell, I’ll just keep it here,” he muttered. “No need to go to no trouble.” He shifted and pulled his long topcoat together, buttoning it. He felt for the fourth button. “Huh? Musta lost it.” He brushed at his lapel.

Though the early morning air was cool, the days were unseasonably hot for early June, so combined with the recent heavy rains, the odor of horse dung and rotting hay, filled with nests of crawling maggots, was very potent; yet, Daniel seemed oblivious to it.

Three huge, blue-black horse flies surged and droned noisily around the horse's face, then alighted on its blinders. The horse flinched. Two more landed on its rump. The horse swished his tail and snorted loudly. A horse from a barn across the alley responded, neighing. Another horse whinnied.

"Blackie, settle down," Daniel admonished softly. "We're gonna wake the neighborhood."

Daniel deliberated for a few moments, not anxious at the thought of what Miss Murray might say about his lack of timeliness, knowing she had expected him much earlier. He hopped down from the carriage and landed straight into a puddle of murky water, splattering it on his pants legs. "Aw, damn it!" he muttered, irritated, and sidestepped out of the way. "Oohhh!" he moaned. There was a shooting pain down his back to his left leg. The ache came on periodically, sometimes lasting a while, and made him limp. He stamped his foot. "Whew! That's better." Straightening up, he was tall and gaunt, although he had a noticeable slouch to his shoulders.

The horse gave a loud snort and shifted back and forth. Daniel looked at him quizzically. "You're shore skittish tonight." He walked over and gave Blackie a reassuring pat on the rump. "You're okay, boy."

He ambled towards the back of the hearse, limping a bit. He hesitated, lurched back, and glowered at a dark crouching figure down the alley, loping closer. He heard the low-curdling growl. He stood rigid, watching the animal move closer. The big, black dog stopped, bristled and growled, showing its large canines. Daniel curled his lips and gritted his teeth intuitively. The dog swayed back and forth, then suddenly turned and ran down the alley.

"It knows better then to mess with me," Daniel snarled.

He gave the handle a push and swung open the back-gate of the hearse. The hinges squeaked and whined unwillingly. He frowned, knowing he kept putting off greasing them. 'Just ain't had no time,' he thought. 'Either you're real busy or ya ain't.'

"Shoo," Daniel hissed, "shoo, shoo," and swished away the flies attracted to the rank odor left from previous remains. He reached

in and pulled a small freshly scented pine box closer. He fixed a heavy, black rain cloak over the casket to protect it from the mist and lifted it out.

Unlatching the side-gate by the coach house was cumbersome. "Damn it," he grumbled. He shifted the casket, wedging it against the fence, then leaned way over to unhook the gate from the inside.

The sidewalk along the gangway was narrow. An orange-striped cat jumped from the shadows. Daniel almost stumbled. "Scat! Scat!" The cat meowed loudly and cut-in around his legs. "Get out of here!" He kicked at the cat. "Damn thing," he puffed and shifted the casket, tightening his grip.

A smoky stench rolled from the short stack of the incinerator at the back of the annex, and swarms of black-jacket flies zipped and buzzed around noisily. Daniel grimaced. 'Whatever it is, it shore does stink.'

A bright light was shining above the rear door of the annex, and he could see a dim light in the small-paned window. As he got to the steps, he noticed the curtain draw back and a face staring at him.

"Thank goodness, he's here," the woman murmured and blew out a sigh of relief. Quite anxious, she had come to the anteroom to look several times. Her face was flushed, and her circular, silver-rimmed glasses were tilted a bit.

She was on the tall side and somewhat heavysset. Her long, formfitting, charcoal-gray dress, trimmed heavily with a row of black-velvet braiding down the front, looked rumped. Her honey-brown hair, swept in a bun on top of her head, was streaked with gray and wavy. Some wiry hairs stuck out uncontrollably from the moisture in the air.

She twisted the round, brass handle and pulled. "Goodness," she frowned, "this door!" She pulled harder.

Daniel was standing on the landing, wearing a rather morose resolve on his face. He gave a short nod. "Miss Murray."

Miss Murray had never seen him any other way, always taciturn. "Come in, Daniel," she said, greeting him in a low somber voice.

He could guess what was coming next and blinked rapidly, something he did frequently when he felt tense.

“My goodness, what took you so long,” she said with strained intentness in her voice.

“Got here soon as I could, Miss Murray,” he replied uneasily.

“Hurry in,” she said, swishing her arm back and forth. “Uh, these nasty flies!” She was quite aware that the mass of flies, plastered against windows, signified death.

In the anteroom, a crucifix hung above the entrance door, and a long-handled, broad industrial broom and a big-scoop, city shovel were propped in the corner. Hanging on the double brass hooks lined along the walls were two heavy cloth slickers and three sets of various-sized, black galoshes neatly lined up on the floor.

Miss Murray closed the heavy door and then gave it an extra shove with her shoulder. She grimaced and swallowed. Daniel’s presence gave off an air of uncleanness, mixed with the heavy smell of tobacco and the hint of alcohol, and his wool suit, slightly damp from the moist air, smelled of mothballs. This was something she had noticed before, but the odor seemed more conspicuous in the clamminess of the close quarters.

Miss Murray scowled at Daniel. “Is your telephone working?” she asked tersely.

“Yes, Ma’am,” he replied.

Daniel had heard the phone ringing but had ignored the last two calls. He decided there was no use trying to explain. “Hope this’ll be all right,” he said, lifting up the edge of the cloak to intentionally divert her attention. “Ain’t nothin’ fancy.”

He had an overstock of five infant caskets the supplier wouldn’t take back, left from the last year’s typhoid outbreak. Not being sure, he chose the pine box, the most modest.

“I’m certain it will be,” Miss Murray answered curtly, taking a brief glance. “Come with me, Daniel.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he replied and compliantly followed Miss Murray into the room.

‘Damn, she’s shore in a snit,’ he thought, noticing the tenseness

in her demeanor. 'Maybe, I shoulda just told her I was gonna need more time ta finish up.'

The room was rather dim. The deep green, canvas roller shades were drawn up on the two, tall windows at each side of the room and impenetrable. A single light bulb, hanging from the ceiling in the middle of the room, cast a flickering orb-shaped shadow against the starkly gray walls. The walls were bordered with dark-oak, wainscot paneling. The dark-oak doors, one coming in from the anteroom and one going out to the hallway, were thick and heavy and wider than usual for easier accessibility. The ceiling was very high, giving the room, though small, a larger dimension. And, the room was sparsely furnished. A long, dark walnut church pew sat along one wall, something accumulated. A deeply carved Roman cross adorned each sidearm. A hooded wicker bassinet was in the middle of the room, and two gurneys covered with clean, white sheets were off to the other side of the room.

Daniel glanced at the gurneys. 'No body!' he thought. He was surprised, since there was usually one, sometimes more.

It was just last year in the summer of 1912, also hot and sticky like this one, when a deadly typhoid epidemic spread through the city. There were many gurneys laden with bodies, shoved next to each other, and others were lined along the hallway outside the room. Day after day for weeks, the hospitals in the city were burgeoning to capacity with the sick and dying, and even though the settlement house was ill equipped, the overworked staff did what they could to help in the distressing situation.

During last year's epidemic, there had been quite a surge in Daniel's business; however, his business had gotten very slow again.

'Just have ta wait and see what she wants here,' he mused, watching Miss Murray walk over to the wicker bassinet. He raised his brow. 'Oh, so that's where it is,' he deduced. 'First time I seen that.' He set the casket on the church pew, pulled off the cloak, and laid it in folds on the seat.

Miss Murray peered down pensively into the bassinet. She

inhaled deeply and breathed out a halting sigh.

Daniel cocked his head, observing her with curiosity. ‘What the hell is she doin’?’

Miss Murray’s lips moved in mute prayer as she gazed towards the ceiling.

“Just born?” Daniel asked.

Her eyes dropped. His question interrupted her meditative thoughts.

“Pardon?”

“Just born?” he repeated.

“A few hours ago,” she answered, acknowledging him brusquely.

Daniel nodded his head sadly. This was not the first time Daniel had come to the settlement house for this purpose; matter of fact, over the years, he had come several times to handle discreet burials of infants.

Miss Murray gathered up the tiny bundle and placed it in the crook of her arm. She nervously took a moment to arrange the thick, white blanket, tucking the cover around the body, making sure it was carefully concealed.

Daniel watched.

Carrying the tiny corpse to the casket, Miss Murray caught Daniel’s gawk. His eyes shifted quickly. Her expression turned blank, realizing she must make sure to mask her emotions better.

Daniel lifted the casket lid and pulled back the white satin quilt. Miss Murray gently nestled the dead infant inside. She watched Daniel cover the tiny body with the quilt and close the casket. Inwardly, a cold chill of finality flowed through her body, but outwardly she gave no indication.

She looked directly into his face. “Daniel,” she said in a quiet tone, yet firm, “I do want him to have a proper burial.”

On the phone, she had given Daniel emphatic instructions that the body need not be prepared, but she reiterated, “The infant is just to be buried,” apparently feeling confident Mother Nature would expedite the matter with haste.

The Devil's Baby



Book Two

One

The neighborhood was quiet, except for isolated spurts of thunder, and it was dark. Down the street, carriage lights beamed conspicuously from the large, impressive, red brick home, fronted by four white columns as did the bright floodlights placed intermittently among the infusion of colorful flowers along the border of the expansive manicured lawn.

On the upper floor of the house, lightning flashed silently through the tall of windows into the master bedroom. Each sporadic burst illuminated the woman's face. Though she was sleeping, her eyelids twitched, registering the subliminal intrusion playing in her subconscious.

...Saturday morning, the street was filled with horse carriages, people crossing back and forth at the intersections, or some chancing across midway, and motorcars honking. It was noisy. Two street sweepers with big brush brooms hurriedly pushed horse dung into piles and shoveled it into a slow moving horse-drawn wagon in a vain attempt to clean the thoroughfare.

There were scores of shoppers bustling along the sidewalk, maneuvering in and out of stores and carrying packages wrapped in brown paper, tied with string. Conversations were mostly a mix of Italian and English. Many were complaining

about the heat.

A girl paused momentarily at a store window. Her dark eyes sparkled with delight as she gazed at three faceless mannequins, dressed in stylish, formfitting outfits in shades of soft blue, green, and beige. Their straight skirts stopped at the ankle, and their shoes were very pointed. Feathers and veils adorned their big, fancy hats. The girl's long dress was shapeless and plain. She continued on.

At a bakery, the window was piled with an assortment of round and long loaves of bread. Glass cases were filled with trays of brutti ma buoni, cannoli, and baba au rhum sweets, appealingly arranged. A bell on the screen door jingled continuously as customers came in and out.

Three shops down, two stoic looking male mannequins were attired in the latest, high-buttoned fitted, gray and tan suits, tagged \$15.50, and summer straw hats with fancy bands, and square-tipped brown and white Oxfords. "Sale \$1.25."

The girl moved out of the way of a big strapping policeman who stepped inside the door of a butcher shop and shouted a greeting in German to the butchers. The store window was filled with long, looping sausages and cheeses in various sized spheres.

The dry goods store had an array of fabrics and latest-model sewing machines. Several men were in the adjacent barbershop, waiting in chairs along the big window, and three were in the barbers' chairs getting haircuts and a shave.

On the corner in front of the apothecary, a crowd had gathered around an organ grinder playing lively music as his monkey, dressed in a colorful red and yellow jockey suit, danced and grinned. People laughed and clapped and threw coins for the monkey to catch. The girl smiled. She turned the corner to Taylor Street.

People, trying to avoid the oppressive heat inside their apartments, were sitting outside on the stoops or steps, talking and laughing and looking. The beating sun did not seem to detour the children in the street, playing.

A man, leaning against the stair rail, strummed a guitar and sang snatches of arias. A young mother on the stoop rocked her crying baby and hummed along.

The girl went by an empty lot, fenced off and neatly planted with tomatoes, peppers, basil and zucchini, though wilting. A goat tied to a lone tree, stood quietly out of the heat. Chickens cackled and scratched at the dirt.

She slipped into the side entrance of a rundown tenement and climbed up the tall, narrow, creaky stairs to the third floor. She paused at the landing, let go of her skirt and took a deep breath. Hesitantly, she opened the door to the small apartment.

The man, sitting at the round oak table in the hot, dank kitchen, jumped up. A bottle of red wine tipped and spilled over the white tablecloth. He kicked the chair out of the way and rushed toward her, waving his clenched fist and yelling wildly, "Stupido. Tu non ascolti! You no leesen!"

The girl cowered, anticipating the blow. The man grasped her chin tightly and struck her solidly across the face. Her raven hair unraveled and fell to her shoulders. "NO-oooh, Papa! NO-oooh!" she cried out, covering her face with her hands.

The man gritted his teeth and slapped the girl harder. "No basta! No more! You no go out!" he huffed. – "Capisci?"

"Si, Papa! Si!" she sobbed, shaking her head frantically.

Beads of sweat rolled down the side of his dark, ruddy face onto his hairy, barrel chest. "Stupido! Stupido!" he roared. He clinched his fist and hit her.

"No, Papa! NO-oooh!" The girl raced towards the open window.

"Stupido! Stupido!" The man ran after her, punching and bellowing.

"Aiuto! Aiuto!" she yelled frantically, clawing at the windowsill, beseeching anyone for help.

At the two-flat next door, the woman in the high-backed rocker on the covered stoop, rocked and waved her fan to and fro. Her face was somber, her dress was black, appropriate for

a widow, and her dark gray hair was pulled back in a bun. She paused, and with an air of modesty, fixed her skirt over her shoes.

“Aiuto! Aiuto!”

The woman sighed wearily and resumed waving her fan and rocking. A woman inside the apartment stepped out onto the stoop. She brushed at her apron, placed her hands on her hips, and gawked. *“That’s the way he treated his first wife,”* she remarked disdainfully in Italian. The older woman pursed her lips and nodded, acknowledging similar disdain, and waved her fan faster. There was a likeness to their looks.

The man, sitting on the high steps of the tenement across the street, flicked sweat from his brow and wiped his fingers on his undershirt. He rested his elbow back on his knee, took a long drag on his cigar, blew smoke, and stared vacantly. A man, passing by on the sidewalk, paused to talk.

“Aiuto! Aiuto!”

The man gaped up and flicked his cigar. The other man looked over his shoulder and smirked. The man on the steps grimaced and nodded in agreement. A clay pot of red geraniums fell from the windowsill, down three stories, and smashed into bits on the sidewalk. The men continued to converse as though oblivious to the cries for help.

A woman leaned out on the second floor windowsill and glared. Sweaty from cooking in her sweltering kitchen, she swiped some hair from her forehead and yelled, *“Dominic! Julio!”* She shook her big spoon.

A boy with unruly black hair, a dirt-streaked face, ragged shirt, and cut-off pants was playing kick the can in the street. He looked perplexed and shrugged at other boy. He cupped his hand to his mouth and yelled back. *“We’re not doin’ nothin’, Mama.”*

Fuming with anger, the man pulled the girl back from the window by her hair and punched her.

“Papa’! Ti prego, Papa’ non farlo,” she screamed, begging

him to stop. She wrenched back and forth trying to tear herself away. The man thrust his fist into her stomach. She bent in pain. "Papa' Papa'! Ti prego, Papa' non farlo," she cried weakly.

He grabbed her by the shoulders and rammed his knee into her abdomen. She clamped her hands over her mouth. The gushing vomit spilled through her fingers, down the front of her dress.

A downpour opened. Everyone on the street scurried inside the buildings, except for some children who laughed and faced the rain with delight. They ran and splashed in the filthy water rushing from the gutters. "Dominic, Julio. Anna, Luigi." The children ignored the repeated calls. "Rosa, Mario."

Thunder exploded. The children ran inside....

The air-conditioning had been on for several days in the house, and the master bedroom was very cool, but the woman was sweating. Her pink, silky pajama top was disheveled, and a moist, brown curl stuck to the side of her face. She kicked at the sheets and flung her arm over the side of the bed. A pillow dropped to the floor. Her husband was sleeping very soundly on the other side of their king-sized bed with one arm stuffed under his pillow and his knees brought up to almost a crouch, apparently unaffected by her restlessness.

As the woman's reverie continued to unfold, her face quivered and her eyes rolled under her lids as though she was straining to see.

...The hard rain finished earlier in the evening, so the street was hazy, and it was relatively empty. The shining streetlamps gave off an eerie afterglow as a girl in a long, black rain cape hurried along the sidewalk. The stores she passed were closed and dark inside.

She halted abruptly, grabbed her stomach, and whined in pain. A man and woman walked by her and appeared to ignore her intentionally but gawked with curiosity at the horse-drawn hearse clipping down the street. The man approaching rolled

his eyes sidelong, tucked his folded umbrella under his arm, and warily stepped towards the curb to his auto. He hastily cranked the engine several times. The engine ground and sputtered, then let out a resounding roar. The man scurried into the passenger's side, scooted over to the driver's side, and drove off quickly.

Regaining her composure, the girl crossed the side street to the next block. Two men burst out of a saloon, drunk and blabbering noisily. They swaggered towards her. "Ooh, she's a young one," one of them remarked lustily. The other man's eyes lit up. "How much, little lady, two bits?" he chided with a sneer.

"Two? Two for two bits?" the other goaded, flicking two fingers in front of her face.

Both men laughed heartily. One grabbed the girl by the arm and jostled her, attempting to pull open her cape. She broke loose, made a wide move around them, and scurried on, frightened and winded.

Spurned, the man gritted his teeth and waved his fist in a contemptuous gesture, "Puttana!" he spit. "Ah, you filthy whore!"

The girl stumbled at the curb but caught herself. A streetcar stopped. The conductor looked her way. She ignored him. She scurried past a settlement house building, then another. She stopped to try a door. It was locked. She searched down the street, desperate. She saw lights and a big house at the end of the block. She held her skirt and rushed on.

Fumbling nervously, the girl opened the wrought-iron gate and hurried up the steps of the old mansion. She paused on the piazza and leaned against a tall stone pilaster, panting and clutching her abdomen.

The pain subsided. She knocked at the door. "Aiutatemi! Aiutatemi!" No answer. Impatient, she knocked again. "Aiutatemi vi prego! Help! Help!" she cried.

The woman looked up curious and placed her pen on the desk. "Sounds like someone is knocking at the front door." She

glanced at her watch. "My goodness, it's late. Wonder who it could be?" She rolled back her chair and walked into the vestibule. She paused and listened.

"Aiuto! Aiutatemi vi prego! Help! Pleeease!"

"I'm coming. I'm coming." The woman flipped the bolt on the double door and peeked out. "Just a moment." She closed the door, unlatched the chain, and opened the door. The girl collapsed in the threshold. "Goodness gracious!" She took hold of the girl's arm. "Poor Dear, let me get you inside...."

The woman heaved a long sigh of relief and nestled into a comfortable position in the bed. Her husband turned on his back, straightened his knees slightly and repositioned his arm over the cover. His mouth dropped. He started snoring heavily.

The time passed. The woman grew restless. She threw her head from side to side. She clinched her fists and dug her heels into the bed. She took short, deliberate breaths. "Unhhh, unhhhh, unhhhh," she groaned loudly. She jolted and gasped.

Her husband let out a blubbery snort. He opened his eyes, and for a moment, he was disoriented. "Rosemary," he said, tersely. "Rosemary, are you okay?" He leaned over and jostled her shoulder. "Rosemary! Rosemary!" He heard a low protracted groan.

"Yesss, Dannn," her voice drifted.

"Oh, boy," he muttered, disgusted. Dan adjusted his pillow and plopped his head down. He began snoring again.

Rosemary shifted restlessly. She began to moan very softly.

... "I wanna my baby. I wanna my baby."

"Rosamaria, not now." The woman, standing by the hospital bed, answered Rosamaria calmly and patted her hand reassuringly.

"I wanna my baby. I wanna my baby."

"Rosamaria, it would be better that you not see the baby just now."

*“My baby, my baby.” Rosamaria strained to get up.
“Lie down, Rosamaria. You must rest,” she said gently.
“I wanna my baby. I wanna my baby,” Rosamaria pleaded.
She looked at Rosamaria with frustration. She turned to the nurse standing silently on the other side of the room. “Millie, bring the child!”
“Miss Murray!”
“Millie, I said...”
“But Miss Mur...”
“Millie, do as I say. Bring the child.”
“Yes, Miss Murray.”
Millie brought out a small wrapped bundle from the tandem room. She nervously uncovered the lifeless newborn.
Rosamaria’s face contorted in horror. “Ayeeee! Ayeeee! Ayeeee, Ayeeee, é figlio del diavolo!”*

A thunderous bolt of lightning broke out of the sky, whining and zigzagging through the bedroom windows, and discharged frightfully close. Rosemary lunged up in bed, gripped her head with her hands, and sucked in a deep breath. “Ayeeee! Ayeeee! Ayeeee, Ayeeee, é figlio del diavolo! It’s the devil’s baby! It’s the devil’s baby!”

Her husband opened his eyes and sat up, alarmed. “Rosemary, are you all right?” He fumbled for the lamp on his nightstand. “Rosemary, what’s wrong? Rosemary!”

“Get it away! Get it away!” Rosemary screamed. Her voice was wretched with terror. She groped for the sheet trying to shield herself.

“Damn! What’s wrong with you?” he shouted, shaking her arm.

“Get it away! Get it away! Get it away! Get it away!” Rosemary raged incoherently. She flailed her arms wildly, endeavoring to sweep him away.

“What the hell!” He scooted up on his knees and grasped her arms. He shook her firmly. “Stop it, Rosemary! Wake up! —

Rosemary, wake up!” He caught a strange glint in her eyes.

A hard, steady knock distracted him. Dan felt his scalp tighten. He glanced warily toward the windows.

Spinning, glistening white balls of hail pelted against the windowpanes and bounced along the wooden deck outside. The wind intensified. The trees bent and groaned in agony. Electrical lines seared and sparked loudly, shooting out a profusion of blazing blue light into the night. The lights blinked off.

“Jesus Christ, what’s going on!” he yelled and jumped out of bed.

A deafening roar reverberated. Debris smashed against the house with tumultuous force. The French doors shuddered and swelled and burst open. Windowpanes shattered noisily. Curtains billowed and flapped. The crystal perfume bottles rattled and rolled off the dresser. The long antique mirror tapped loudly against the wall.

The powerful blast pressed hard against Dan’s body. He felt an intrinsic force compelling him to protect his family. With his shoulders hunched, his jaw set, and his hands clinched, he maneuvered towards the doors. He groped for one door, grabbed it, and reached for the other. Rain stung his face. He groaned, shoved both doors shut, and wedged his shoulder against them, pushing with all of his strength. His body jolted with each strong thrust. The doors flew open. He stumbled and fell back on the floor, dazed. The raging wind whipped at him.

Minutes after it came, the raging wind waned.

Rosemary shuddered as the electromagnetic force released its grip. She gazed into the darkness, bewildered, “My God, what’s happening?” Frantically feeling the bed, she cried out, “Dan, Dan, Dannn!” She fumbled nervously, feeling around her nightstand. “God, no lights!”

She called out, “Dan!—Dannn, where are you!”

Dan sat slumped on the floor, exhausted. “Over here,” he puffed, attempting to catch his breath. He stood up unsteadily on

the slippery floor. "Goddamn, that was crazy," he mumbled, shaking his head. He couldn't believe how he plunged into the malaise.

"Dan, are you okay?"

"Yeah. Are you okay?" he asked, concerned.

"I'm okay."

An effusion of light sheeted the sky with such brilliance, it filled the bedroom. Rosemary's eyes widened. "Are you sure you're okay?"

Dan's face was drained and taut. His hair stood straight. His wet tee shirt and pajama bottoms clung to his body. Rosemary threw back the covers and started to get out of bed.

"Stay there!" Dan ordered sternly. He pushed the doors closed.

"Dan, watch, there's glass!" The floor was wet, and pellets of broken window glass were by the doors.

The light faded. "Can't see a goddamn thing around here," Dan muttered, exasperated. "I need a flashlight. Don't we have a flashlight somewhere?"

"I don't know," Rosemary said nervously. "I have candles in the bathroom." She threw back the sheet and scooted out of bed. "I'll get a candle."

"Okay," he sighed and shook his head wearily.

"Don't move. I'll be right back," Rosemary said.

"Okay, hurry up."

Groping along the wall in the blinding darkness, Rosemary sensed that she was by the bathroom. "Ooouuuch!"

"What's wrong?" Dan yelled.

"I bumped my toe on the door," Rosemary yelled back.

"Whew!" Dan breathed a sigh of relief.

Rosemary ran her hand along the door until she found the handle. "Good," she whispered breathlessly.

She patted her hand along the cool marble vanity till she felt one of the sinks. "Oh, good." She felt underneath for the drawer, "Ah, there," and she ruffled through the drawer. "Got'em!" She

struck the match against the box cover. It blazed for an instant, then flickered out. "Darn!" Anxious, she struck another match, maneuvered it around, carefully reaching inside the tall, stained-glass cylinder, and lit the votive candle. Madonna's face beamed. Rosemary blinked at the brightness.

She lit a long white tapered candle. "Ouch." She shook the match and dropped it in the sink. She picked up the candle, lighted another candle and then another. She lifted the glass chimney, lit the candle, and set it back in the brass candleholder.

"Uh, that's better," she murmured, gazing at the array of blazing candles along the vanity.

"Rosemary!" Dan called. "What are you doing!"

Rosemary blinked. "I'm coming." She carefully picked up the brass candleholder by the big looped handle.

"Here we go," Rosemary said, hurrying into the bedroom. The candle flickered and dimmed. Rosemary paused. The candle flared. She smiled smugly. "It's amazing how much light you get from a candle."

"Be careful with that," Dan warned.

The candlelight cast an eerie mien on Rosemary's face. Her eyes glowed. Dan stared.

"Dan, you're bleeding!" Rosemary screeched.

He gaped at the open gash across the top of his right hand and drops of blood on the floor.

"Ohh, God," he cringed. "I didn't even feel it." The sight of his own blood made him feel woozy.

"I'll get something," Rosemary declared panicky...

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The

DEVILS

Baby

by Carol Mercado

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