

THE BOOKS OF PANDEMONIUM: BOOK 2

DEVIL'S BLOOD

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Chapter 1

One brisk September morning in 1592, a boy sat on a roof eating an apple for breakfast. A copper key hung around his neck. His hand was stained rusty red, the same colour as the apple he was eating.

The stain was an accident. The key was a gift.

The apple tasted delicious.

High above, a great flock of kites swooped circles in the sky, watching for scavenge. The smoke from twenty thousand chimneys rose up in thin etched lines around them. From up here, the spires and crooked rooftops down below looked no bigger than toys – a small, busy heap between the green of the Thames valley and the silty brown of the estuary.

Occasionally one of the birds would plummet, diving for butcher's offal or a bloating dead dog.

Down in the streets, the top-heavy buildings blocked out the sky. The air was thick with drovers' curses and smells both abominable and mouth-watering. The smells came from food stalls, tanners' vats, boozing kens and slaughterhouses; from churches, palaces and hovels – and ripest of all, from the mud. London mud was rich and thick and black as ink, and in this wet autumn it coated everything: prince and pauper, merchant and thief; crackpots, magicians, beasts, actors, and a few brave and fuddled foreigners wondering how they ever ended up in this damp and vicious riot.

London was the greatest city in Christendom, or a murderous dungheap, or almost anything in between. It all depended on where you were standing, and what you chose to see. But it was always alive.

Just how alive was a secret known to a very, very few. Mostly you had to look underground, digging down through layers of destruction and fire and cannibal growth. Down into the city's lost past, sifting through the rubble and trash.

It was there that you'd find most of them. How deep depended on how long they'd been here – and some of them had been here a very long time. Brought here in their thousands, over a hundred generations – captured in amulets, magic rings, cunning charms; bound into statues and palaces and temple altars. Their original masters had turned to dust, but the devils of London continued to work their

magic. Magic upon magic, rising up, until you could not tell one twisting spell from another.

Some were half remembered in legends and curses and tall, dark tales. Black Dog of Newgate; King Lud; Old Thames the River Father. But for each of these there were hundreds more that had long been forgotten. Most hoped to stay that way.

Of all the Londoners alive today, very few knew the truth about devils. And only one, out of all the city's teeming populace, knew how to find them.

'Ack Ack! Swinepork stinkard you be—'

'What?'

From up on his rooftop, Jack heard a thud below.

'Uncrouch, filthnest lokmok.'

'H-hold there. Hold! Imp!'

'Up-up, nitwit Kit. Up-OUT!'

A screech of scraping chair legs, and a smack.

'Hellspawn scullion!' Kit bellowed. Charging footsteps shook the house. They stopped short with a thwack, and a tinkle of breaking glass.

'Ack! Clumsing dolt-head! *Out*, before all shinies be shattered!' The thwacks sounded thick and fast.

Jack took another bite of his apple, still gazing out at the city. On a morning like this it was a sight to tingle the humours – the dawn coming up through a skein of blue

smoke; a thicket of steeples; the merry brown river; the half-ruined tower of St Paul's. You could almost believe it was a peaceful place, sitting up here.

Jack swallowed, forcing down the bittersweet fruit. Looking out at the city of devils, knowing what lay in wait for him, tied his stomach in knots.

Later today, he'd be in amongst it.

Another crash from downstairs. Jack scowled. Kit and the imp: like the stain on his hand, they'd come to him by accident, and just like the stain, he often had cause to regret them. A scurvy scheming intelligencer for a friend, and a sprite of Satan for a servant. No wonder they were always making trouble.

Down on the street, the front door burst open and Kit stumbled out.

'Jack! Yes you, you abominable pigeon: don't pretend I'm not here, I can see you!'

Kit stood in the road, craning his neck. A drawn sword trailed from his right hand.

'How's the morn, Kit?' said Jack.

'I'll tell you how it is. Your servant has crossed me for the last time. No more. No more, I say.' Kit took a savage cut at thin air, then stopped as he remembered something. 'Oh, and I need to borrow . . . or rather, I have borrowed . . . you know. The four shillings we talked about. Brings our reckoning up to . . . let's see . . .' Kit sheathed his sword,

fished out a leather-bound book from the breast of his doublet, and riffled through the pages. 'Here we are. Sixteen shillings, thruppence ha'penny.'

'Sixteen, Kit?'

Kit drew himself up straight. 'You take that tone with me? Me, who has saved your sorry life three times? Aye, sixteen shillings, thruppence ha'penny. Scant good it did me, neither. Those dice-men don't play straight.'

'Dice-men?' said Jack. 'That four shillings – that was for the Plan. That was . . .' He was suddenly so angry he could hardly speak. 'I'm going into town today, for *your scheming Plan* Kit, and all you had to do was spend *my money* on a band of *musicians* . . . and you've lost it at dice . . . ?'

'Don't splutter, Jack, it's ungentle. The money is gone. We still want musicians. Now be a good boy and lend me another four shillings. If you can manage that, *perhaps* I will condescend to repay you when *my Plan* bears fruit and we're all as rich as Zacatecas.'

Jack shook his head. 'That four was our last. Lud's blood, Kit . . . There ain't. No. Money.'

Jack spat the words out, bitter as rue. Kit's Plan: aye, but Jack was the one putting his head in the cauldron. Today. He couldn't believe it had come so quickly.

He felt a tingle – not quite heat – in his stained right hand.

'Well?' Kit was still waiting.

‘Stew yourself, Kit,’ said Jack. ‘You want money, go peddle your arse for shoe leather.’

Kit made a face at him, thrust his debt ledger back into his doublet, and walked off down the road.

From the house below came a tuneless humming and a brisk, triumphant sweeping sound.

The Raven alehouse had been Beth Sharkwell’s idea to begin with. In the spring, when she and Jack had cheated a devil and mudlarked his gold – a wild, impossible weight of gold – the first thing she’d done was purse her lips and come out with one of her grandpa’s Thieving Laws: ‘Hope for the best, allow for the worst.’ The first thing to make sure of was a bolthole, somewhere small and cheap and murky.

The Raven was murky enough, Jack reflected, as he lowered himself in through the attic window. Hunkered down at the north edge of the old Convent Garden, the only reason it hadn’t fallen down yet was that there was so little of it to fall: just the one room downstairs, a cellar beneath, and the attic above. Now that the worst had duly come about, and their gold was stolen, and Beth’s bolthole was all they had left, it looked murkier still. Sour beer, sour prospects: customers few and dwindling; the last remnant of their fortune staked on a Plan that was apt to get Jack into exactly the sort of trouble he’d sworn to avoid for the rest of his days.

Jack slid down to the floor of the attic. A stale, harsh smell hung in the air – the tobacco that Beth had been smoking the past week in order to perfect the disguise she'd been working up. The tobacco smell reminded Jack of his ma, who was dead, and of Harry the horse-cope, who'd shared a pipe with Jack on the way to the gallows, and who was also dead. He decided to leave the window open.

They couldn't go on as they were. Jack had told himself that many times in the days leading up to this particular day. And Beth liked the Plan. There was the nub of it: Beth liked the Plan very well indeed.

Downstairs, the imp had finished its sweeping. Jack watched as the broom floated across the room to nestle up against a small rag on the front windowsill. The broom went still; the rag stirred into life.

Every other devil on Earth was stuck with whatever home it had been bound to. The imp was the only one that could be whatever it liked. It was a wondrous magical ability that puzzled the greatest wizards in Christendom.

The imp mostly used it to clean things.

The floor of the boozing ken – or the Saloon Royale, as the imp insisted on calling it – was scraped clean of any trace of dust. The furniture was arranged in rigid ranks against the walls – the long table, the four broke-backed chairs, and Kit's favourite, a low horse-hair couch. A square of embroidery hung on the wall over Kit's sleeping spot,

stitched with big red letters. It hadn't been there yesterday. Jack squinted at the writing, mouthing out the words:

EVERY COUCH, WHEREON HE LIETH, IS UNCLEAN:
AND EVERY THING, WHEREON HE SITTETH,
SHALL BE UNCLEAN.

'Imp? You been needling Kit?'

The imp was enjoying itself, deep into its role as a polishing rag, only just visible as a circular blur over the pewter mugs and spoons laid out on the table.

'Imp . . .' said Jack.

'Needling, tsa!' The rag stopped mid swish, flapped over to the embroidery and did a few twirls around it. 'Last night I was needle, see? Threading Levitick from the Big Book! What entklessent book that is.'

'More Leviticus,' said Jack.

'Tcha! Lokmok dislikes it, ekt?'

'Aye, I think he does . . .'

Jack still wasn't sure about having Bible verses around the tavern. The drinkers of St Giles parish were not clean men, and nor were they reading men; and even if they had been, Bible verses were not likely to spark their humour.

The imp went back to its polishing. Jack didn't see how the spoons could be any shinier than they already were.

'You nearly finished, Imp?' he said.

'Shiny shiny shiny *shiny* . . .'

'Cos I'm ready to go.'

'Sheeny gleany glintick-gleam . . .'

Jack reached into his sleeve for his roll of tools. There was no point reasoning with the imp when it was cleaning. It needed a direct command, or nothing.

Leaning over to spread out the roll on the table, Jack felt the key around his neck swing out on its string. The key that King Lud had given him. A devil's gift – a pointless, tarnished thing that didn't open any doors that Jack knew of – and yet he couldn't bring himself to throw it away.

He reached into the special padded pocket he'd added alongside the loops for his gilks and picks. Inside was a giant dead beetle, as big as the apple Jack had eaten for breakfast, with long feathery feelers and jaws fit to bite off thumbs. Before it became the imp's favourite body, it had been part of the magician Dr Dee's rare insect collection. The Goliath beetle, Dee called it.

'Come here, Imp. Time to hop over.'

The rag whisked past his ear and landed on the table, quivering with anticipation. Jack laid the Goliath beetle down on top of it. The rag stopped quivering, went limp. The Goliath beetle stirred, spread its wings and buzzed up into the air to land on Jack's shoulder.

'No more time for glintick?'

'Later, Imp.' Jack forced some cheer into his voice. 'Tell

you what: things go right today, I'll buy another spoon. A silver one.'

For a moment the imp was struck dumb.

'Eckt . . . *silver* . . . shiny?' it managed, finally.

'Real silver, aye.'

The imp chattered with delight. 'Joy of krettenheft, boy-master! All to go rightly-sprightly, shuklet will see to it, tcha!'

'Let's hope so,' said Jack.

'And so, first we visit with lovey-dove, nei?' said the imp.

'She ain't—' Jack shook his head. 'Never mind.'

'Bethany Lovely-face Shark-tongue—'

'Aye, her,' said Jack. Beth Sharkwell – the real reason he couldn't stop what was happening today. She was already out there, in the thick of it, starting the Plan. By most reckonings, she was risking more today than him.

'And thence to Smithfield devil-roost,' said the imp.

'Aye.' Jack felt a flutter of panic. It was happening; it was really beginning. 'You stay quiet now, Imp. Don't want me taken up for witchcraft again, alongside everything else . . .'

The imp burrowed down inside his doublet. Jack tucked his tools up his sleeve. He couldn't be any more ready than this.

Jack opened his front door and set off down Broad St Giles – heading east, into the City of London, to steal away a devil.