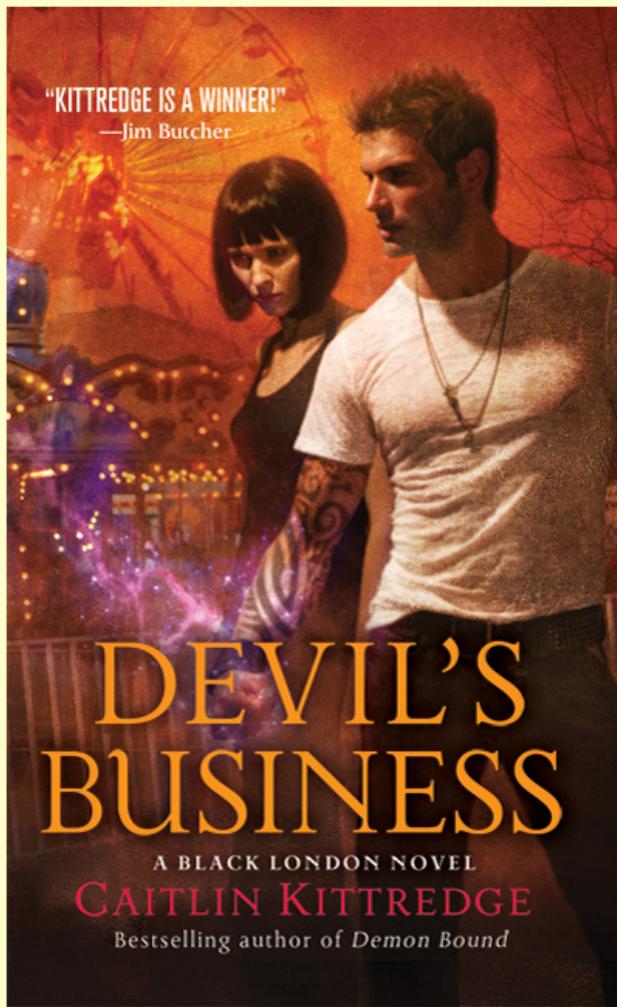


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DEVIL’S BUSINESS

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CHAPTER 1

When the checkout girl at Sainsbury's tried to murder him with her bare hands, Jack Winter decided he should probably get out of London for a while.

He'd joined her queue with a fistful of crisp packets, chocolate, and a few wrapped sandwiches. The woman ahead of him wanted to argue about her change, and Jack simply wanted to get outside so he could smoke.

The Sainsbury's on Fenchurch Street was crammed into a dingy granite shopfront above a 1960s brick box that tried to blend in with the older, more ornate row buildings around it and did a piss-poor job. The two front windows were planked over with plywood and caution tape, and Jack still detected the sandy crunch of glass fragments under his boots.

The area around Aldgate had gotten a hard hit from the rioting and general chaos of the weeks before, and the Sainsbury's was one of the few shops

within striking distance of his flat that was open late, or open at all.

He shoved his food onto the belt and felt in his pockets for spare coins, few and far between these days. Any residual jobs he might have had as an exorcist or clearing homes and workplaces of the dead, or the undead, dried up with the chaos. When you're responsible for releasing an old god like Nergal from his prison to devour the psyches of London's inhabitants, people tended to hold it against you.

Even if you'd promptly helped put him back again.

Jack supposed that was fair. If he were a hearth witch, ghost finder, or anyone else who knew what'd really happened to cause half of London to lose their minds and take to the streets, he'd tell him to fuck off right along with them.

The checkout girl ran his food listlessly over the scanner, staring directly at a buzzing light tube behind Jack's head. His total popped up, and she just kept staring.

"'Scuse me, luv," he said, thrusting his mess of lint-encrusted coins and a crumpled fiver at her. "I don't mean to be that bloke, but I wasn't planning on spending the entire night in your shop, edgy and deconstructed as it is in its present state."

He expected a sneer, or possibly a muttered curse—she looked the type, riot of blue hair and chain necklaces under her uniform shirt, in sharp contrast to most of her colleagues, who ran more along the lines of *hijabs* and sensible shoes.

She turned her dull gaze from the light fixture to his face, and Jack took a step back. Her eyes were

entirely blank, and filmed over with the first stages of decomposition.

“You did this,” she said, before she launched herself over the till at him.

His step back wasn't enough, and her fingernails caught Jack's neck. He fell into a display of tea mugs and digestive biscuits and slammed the floor hard. The checkout girl couldn't have weighed more than fifty kilos, but she wrapped her hands around Jack's throat with the strength and rage of a much larger and more predatory creature.

She was screaming, and black blood-infused spittle flecked her lips and chin and landed on his cheeks. She slammed Jack's head into the vinyl floor in time with each cry.

It wasn't the most alarming situation Jack had found himself in by a long shot, but it was worrisome enough. Deranged types were the worst—there was no reasoning with them, and usually the only way to end the scuffle was to knock them out or chop off their heads, depending on their level of deadness.

He gathered his legs under him and tried to buck the girl off, which worked in the sense that she flopped to one side but didn't detach her fingers from his throat. Hitting her with a paralysis hex at this range would be dangerous—the thing could bounce back and smack him in the nose, and then he'd be easy pickings for this crazy twat.

Jack decided on the next best thing—he balled up his fist and punched the girl under the eye, glancing the blow off her cheekbone. He'd more intended to startle than hurt her, but she hissed as if his fist

were made of hot iron, falling back on her arse and scuttling through the broken glass. She paid no more mind to her cuts than if she were crawling through a bed of custard cake.

Hauling himself to his feet, Jack got out two breaths before the checkout girl was back up. “You did this,” she repeated in a guttural, ragged snarl. Her movements weren’t her own, her next attempt to tackle him resulting in Jack sidestepping and the girl falling into the sandwich case, more glass slicing at her skinny arms as it shattered.

Not a zombie—she was breathing like a chainsaw, pulse throbbing in her neck, plus she wasn’t sewed up with red thread and encased in hoodoo magic. Not a demonic possession, either—his psychic sight wasn’t pinging off the charts trying to tell him something from Hell was wearing a nice punk girl’s skin.

Human magic then. That narrowed his options to fight back considerably.

Jack grabbed a mop from where the janitor had abandoned it and snapped the head off, holding the pointy end in front of him. “*Stop*,” he ordered when the girl came at him again. She was fading rapidly, blood flowing freely from her nose and mouth, black stuff oozing out of her tear ducts as her brain strained to contend with the violation of a compulsion spell.

Whoever was running the spell had to be nearby—and that was who interested Jack.

The girl ignored his ultimatum and sprang again. She was as agile as a shapeshifter with the accuracy

of a predator. Whoever had hit her with the compulsion had juiced her with a few enhancements. No wonder her body was shutting down one system at a time. Soon her brain would pop and she'd be a blue-topped carrot on the floor of Sainsbury's.

Jack gripped the mop handle like a nightstick and whipped it up and across her temple as she came. He'd gotten hit by enough members of London's finest to know it was the quickest way to put someone down.

The girl dropped straight down, knees folding up. A thin line of blood ran across the tiles from her nose, and Jack swiped it onto his palm as he joined the exodus of panicking customers into the street.

He stopped, tried to catch more than a lungful of air, and cast his eyes up and down the pools of light illuminating Fenchurch Street. Most of the nearby cars were parked and empty, but a Peugeot sitting in a loading zone contained a passenger. Said passenger was trying to turn over the engine as the whoop of police klaxons closed in.

Jack darted into traffic, causing the driver of a small hybrid to swerve up onto the pavement. He ignored the cursing and horns, reaching the Peugeot just as the engine caught at last. There wasn't time to be delicate and ask leading questions, so he drew back his elbow and drove it through the driver's window.

The man inside started to shift into gear to run him over, but Jack grabbed him by the jaw with his blood-stained hand. "Shut it off."

His victim squirmed and twisted, but he didn't scream for help or shout for the police, like a normal person should when a crazed man covered in blood smashed into their car on a public street. Jack gave the driver a shake. "Shut it off or I'll lay a blood hex on you that'll have your eyeballs dripping out your arse."

The man considered him for a few seconds more, and then took his hand off the gearshift and foot off the clutch. The car stalled out, but Jack didn't relax his grip. "Why are you after me?"

The man glared, trying to swallow under Jack's grip. "If you're going to kill me, just do it. My soul is right with my gods."

Jack wiped his hand clean on the man's wrinkled yellow shirt and opened the door. "Get out."

He did, and stood with his hands dangling at his sides, lip poking out like a sullen teenager. "What's the matter, Winter? Never thought you'd be the type who needed to look someone in the eye before you topped them. Way I heard, you're more the kind to creep up with a knife in the dark and put it in a bloke's kidney."

"What the fuck are you on about, me killing you?" Jack demanded. He had a reputation as a wanker, certainly—shifty, disreputable, untrustworthy. Americans would probably sum it all up with *asshole*. But going about East London doing people in wasn't usually in his repertoire, even by reputation.

"You almost killed every single person this side of the Black and the other," the man spat. "Wouldn't think one more would matter."

It all made sense then. “Ah, you’re miffed I almost let Nergal out to play,” Jack said. “Well, I’ve got news. You’re not the first and you’re miles from the last. You want a shot at me? Take a fucking number, mate, and join the queue.”

The driver drew himself up. Balding and barrel-chested, he wouldn’t have rated a second glance if Jack had passed him on the street, but the fury in his eyes belonged to a much younger, angrier man. “You don’t get to nearly destroy the world as we know it and laugh it off, Winter.” He jabbed his finger into Jack’s chest. “You’ve seen it now. We can find you anywhere, at any time, outside the Black or in it. The Stygian Brothers remember their enemies, and the mark will never fade.”

Jack felt the point between his eyes begin to throb. “Seriously, mate? You expect me to believe you’re a Stygian? Somebody’s creepy uncle, maybe, but that’s as far as I’d go.”

The Brother rolled up his sleeve in response, and exposed the many-lined tattoo all initiates received after they’d had what the Brotherhood called the Dream—the prophetic vision, brought on by hallucinogenic compounds rubbed into the skin—of the Stygian’s many-eyed, tentacled Nameless Ones that stood as an excuse for their adventures in flesh-crafting, self-mutilation rituals, and mind-control spells. A Stygian’s idea of a fun night out.

“Fuck,” Jack muttered. He’d been hoping the bloke was a lone outlier, a nutter who’d gotten a flowerpot smashed during the riots and taken it out

on him at the expense of the poor checkout girl, but he was a Stygian, true enough.

“It’s not just us,” said the Brother. “It’s everyone, Winter.” He smirked, revealing a mouthful of missing molars. Jack couldn’t be sure if they were a result of ritual mutilation or NHS dentistry. “Our bounty will never expire. The sorcerers, the white magic cabals, even the fucking kitchen witches—they know what you did. It doesn’t matter that you decided you’d rather play hero at the eleventh hour. What’s to stop you from changing your mind, the next time that pea-sized brain of yours decides to go Hulk smash? You destroyed half the city, and you ripped holes in the Black, and nobody is safe while you’re about.” He stabbed Jack in the chest again. “I may not be able to toe up to you one on one, but soon enough somebody will. And that’ll solve the problem.”

The man got back into his car and slammed the door. More glass fell to the pavement while he revved the engine. “You want to stay breathing, stay out of London. You are no longer welcome.”

He pulled away into traffic, and Jack cut through an alley when he saw the blue lights of a police car swing around the corner.

The Stygian Brothers. And more, from the sound of it. Nobody could keep track of every sect and small-time group of magic users that proliferated around London like a particularly stubborn venereal disease, but if the Stygians had marked Jack as an undesirable, he was in enough trouble.

He kept to side streets until he came out at the Aldgate East tube station, and waited in the shad-

ows for another ten minutes, until he was sure with both his eyes and his second sight that he hadn't been followed. Nobody and nothing was watching him.

The cuts on his neck and all of the assorted bruises had begun to ache and sting while he'd been walking. Not to mention his fucking midnight snack was lying crushed on the floor of Sainsbury's.

Nobody followed him on the tube, and nobody followed him down the Mile End Road to his flat, but Jack didn't allow himself to relax until the door was shut and locked behind him. The flat was layered in hexes, cobwebs of spellcraft that floated in front of his sight and then flickered and disappeared. He'd shored them up nearly every other day since the riots had died down—not because he was afraid of looters or marauding packs of hoodie teenagers, but because of the exact thing that had just happened at the shop. It hadn't done one fucking bit of good, though—they'd just waited until he'd left the safety of his flat, like properly smart vengeful psychopaths.

He couldn't stay shut up in Whitechapel for the rest of his life, and he couldn't risk another incident like tonight. If the Stygian Brothers had made a move on him in public, outside the Black, then it'd only be a matter of time before somebody with their shit together and their brain clear of low-grade peyote finished the job. It could be necromancers (although the ones who'd tried to wake up Nergal were mostly little bits of flesh and bone in a London mortuary) or it could be the light side—druids or

Wiccans or just a pack of particularly slagged-off hippies. And how humiliating would that be?

“Jack?” Pete Caldecott appeared in the hallway from the bedroom, rubbing her eyes. They fell on his empty hands. “Where’s the food?”

“About that,” Jack said. “Anyone been by while I was out? Anything unusual?”

Pete’s gaze closed up and became calculating. “What did you do now?”

“Me? I’ll have you know I’m the victim here,” Jack muttered. “For once.” He got his bottle of Jameson from the old record cabinet that served as a liquor stash, because all at once that seemed like an excellent idea.

“You’re bleeding.” Pete came into the light and tilted his head with a finger, examining the scratches on his neck.

“Not the first time, likely not the last,” Jack said. He tried to keep it lighthearted, but Pete just sighed and went into the kitchen to fetch her first-aid kit. She was silent while she disinfected the scratches and put a large plaster over the spot on his neck. She was silent entirely too much since they’d put Nergal back where he belonged.

“What’s my diagnosis, doctor?” he tried.

Pete shut the metal lid of the kit. “You’re an idiot, but you’ll live.”

She got up and went back into the bedroom without another word. Jack spread out on the sofa, after swallowing a handful of aspirin with his whiskey. It was easier than going to bed and listening to more of the silence.



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