

# DEVIL CITY

**THE LARK CASE FILES, BOOK II**

CHRISTIAN READ

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## ONE

There's a knock on the Queen of Hell's door. I stub out the cigarette and answer it.

It's the Devil. He's wearing zebra skin pants, a leather cowboy hat with a skull on the front and wrap around shades.

'You found me,' I say. He grins, too wide on his paper-skin face.

'Did you ever really think you'd get away?'

'No,' I say. Then I spring the trap.

But that's a few days away.

## Two

### I

My name is Lark and I'm a magician. Here's what you need to know.

I used to work for the Library, the most powerful cult, Lodge, call it how you like, in town. Was sort of a cop, more like a Sheriff.

Me and my partner Jon used to keep a lid on all the rivalry, all the grudge-conjures and summoning fuck-ups, keeping everything cool. The job started to change and we went from cops to jailers. Not our scene.

Then Jon went and got himself possessed by some mask-thing that calls itself The Hollow. My girl Scarlet, high up in the Library by then, left me. Then the Library kicked me out for demanding we help Jon, even when it wasn't *convenient*.

That's when I started kicking it freelance, doing odd-jobs to stay fed, to get me books, keeping my head down. Then, Scarlet hired me to investigate a hardcase throw down between two cults. Some sort of occult turf-war saw dead bodies all over the City and who needs that? But the war let something out of the cage. A kind of destroying spirit called an Archon. All of this was set up by a psychopath and triple-bastard just called the Old Man, who wanted to merge with the Archon, to... fuck, I don't know. Live forever? Become a God? Whatever old bullies have always wanted.

But a girl called Wick got the spirit instead.

I played sides off against each other and Wick got the God, I got the Old Man dead and the job got done.

Only problem was, Scarlet wasn't backing my play like I figured. Fact is, without me, the Library didn't have as many heavy hitters so she framed it so her crew took the glory and made damn sure it looked like they pulled the big Hollywood rescue on me.

Ever wonder what happens when a prison guard goes to jail?

Here I am. The Library still doesn't want me, my partner is still into the Hollow and I'm dangling, alone in a City I'm cursed, actually cursed, never to leave and I look weak. Hook meat. Blood water drip. They're starting to come at me. Every two-bit street magician with a grimoire and a little Latin grammar. Every toothless prick who think his totem spirit is Meth and every back-lane witch. There's a lot I put the screws too and, thanks to my old baby, they know I'm here alone.

Which is why I'm waiting in the wings while the old stand up comedian is doing his ventriloquist act, trying to convince himself he's performing something densely symbolic and rich in allegory, when he makes the puppet say swears and low level racism to a bored and surly crowd.

It's the safest place a hunted man could be. Wings of an empty stage watching a man no one cares about.

## I I

Welcome to The City. There's only ever one of them.

You know what it's like here, might even live here. On the main streets and avenues, neon saturations contrast against the dark. The rich and the stupid and the incurious live in the centre of town, catching cabs to important meetings during the days, lining up for bars and restaurants, laughing at their lives without friction. They say things without consequence to each other. The buildings up here are tall and cold and cruel.

Step out a little way and things blueshift to bleak. North is under the bridge, where the dockworkers exhaust themselves and drink in bars that proclaim their ethnicities, calming themselves with their people's poisons. The old heart of the City, where townhouses have gone soft and are haunted by too many people in rooms where even the wallpaper needs escape and the wiring's gone wrong. A ghost zone haunted by the living. To the south, the island stabs like a drunk into the sea and you can watch

rubbish and sick, thick green jellyfish ride the ocean all majestic-like. If you look far enough you can see the mainland lights, boasts from better places.

Down there, its smokestacks and back alleys and sobs from directions you'll never pinpoint so don't bother. Where the bus stops are all shattered glass over ancient ad posters and the wild dogs go in packs and the grey men in cars seem determined to take street girls to a party that never seems to end. Ganglands, too, fighting over drugs and money and women and pride. There's a hundred different languages spoken here each day and the food is always sour. No one but braggarts speak louder than a whisper here. All our tattoos are faded. The gutters are ashtrays filled with broke glass snow.

The cars are slow on the edges of the City. They seem almost stuck in whatever hopeless gravity the rest of us are. Stuck in these margins.

You know the kind of place.

It's always night somewhere in The City.

Summer now and blasts of air up from the subway scold and the heat is under every shirt, rolling down every forehead. Tempers high. The audience are drinking beer and in no mood for comedy.

But Lazlo doesn't care. He's put aside the dummy and is telling rigidly formal jokes about his mother-in-law (he's never married and lived with his mother until she died when he was 50) and then about lawyers and on to some toothless racial material that not even the targets can be bothered to be offended by, although one Asian couple breath their exhaustion at the big teeth and fake glasses. They leave without a fuss, less hurt than embarrassed for Lazlo. It's not funny. He wants them laughing anyway. He's a magician and he's looking for paradox.

*It goes better, he's assured me, on the cruise ships and in the restaurants favoured by an elderly crowd.*

'That's the point!' he says to me in his one room walk up. Not a man who ranges widely in his thoughts. We've had this conversation a dozen times in three weeks.

‘These aren’t jokes so much as symbols of comedy! We create a context for laughter without the chaos laughter brings! Don’t you see that, Lark?’

As it happens, no.

‘I go through the motions boy! I use the magical tools, the props. The dummy! The card tricks. The make-up. The suspenders that roll up and they *know* I’m a comedian. We enter a ritual space together and there’s my magic. I find the tension between all this slapstick being old as dirt and it still being fun. Two ideas together, against each other, combining! Magic! That’s magic right there where opposites unite!’

Lazlo became a magician in the 80s after a modest career yelling obscenities at the audience, which was the big style for jokers at the time. I was a boy and in the system so I can’t say I noticed.

One day, he was screaming about something, who knows, women, immigrants, some politician, it doesn’t matter and he found himself in a state of perfect meditation. The gnosis was on him. The null-zone clearbrain state where real magic happens.

He found and read the right books, looking to identify what he’d felt and began a practice he calls ‘jocumancy’. It started when he began to fuel an ambitious summoning project using laughter as a sacrifice, by linking the wills of his audience together, precisely timing laughs as a rite. He spoke to gods and spirits of laughter and ecstasy. What others do with sex-rites or masochist-religion, breaking through into stranger states of mind, he did with performance and comedy.

Then he set about refining the act. His rituals became more formalised. He lost crowds but whatever he’s doing, whatever rite he’s enacting or spiritual being he’s in service too, it’s working. I wouldn’t cross Lazlo. There’s some power there, under his red cheeks and the sweat-dark ruffles of his tuxedo shirt. In the old days, the worst curse a bard could throw was called a *satire*, so that everyone would laugh at you, even when you were dead.

‘But they never laugh. You’re not funny. You have to know that.’

Sneers at me.

‘It’s not about them! It’s about the perfect execution of the Rite of Comedy! People laugh at any old thing. Belching. Swearing. Some nasty comment about some five second celebrity they pretend to hate but secretly crave fawning over. Audiences, Lark, audiences are stupid fickle things and they reward you only when you flatter them and tell them what they know.’

‘So why bother performing? If people are no good at watching your comedy. If it’s their fault they don’t laugh at jokes the mammoths heard.’

Leave aside my suspicions that at least part of his attitude is a hack’s arrogance.

‘One day, before I die, I want to perform a stand-up set so perfect that the magic takes me away and turns me into a joke. Then I’ll be around forever, made fresh for each generation. Unfunny become hilarious. Alchemy. Ever hear about the one about the charlatan prophet and his mark’s kids?’

Ready to end this conversation but he isn’t here anymore. He’s just doing jokes from the Philelogos, a joke book that’s literally older than Christ.

So why am I with him? Why work his show, bring him booze and the foul charcoal filtered cigarettes he likes, the titty mags and the cough medicine and dossing on his couch at an age no one should be sleeping on couches?

A while back I told you I’m afraid of everything. That’s not changed. And now I’m hunted.

See, when Scarlet used *me* to make *her* crew look good, sent a clear message.

Lark’s weak.

Now I’ve got a lot of scumbags we messed with sizing me up payback. It started with a voodoo doll of me in my post office box. A psychic war style bad dream keeping me twitching for days. Demons at the window sills. Scrawled rune on the inside jacket of the paperback,

made to inject pure suicide into my head.

That one was serious. Only shook it off when I realised I'd bought drinking bleach. Banished it hard and started to get paranoid enough to survive.

I have a pad. Sanctum and big apartment both. It's supposed to be secret.

Not anymore.

One of my replacements at the Library, that team of pricks who hate me, will have made fast scratch by selling that information. It's got eleven years of apotropaic magic inside it. Can't stay inside all the damn time. Can't be paranoid enough every second. So I stay with Lazlo because no one's looking for him. No one's scrying me in Lazlo's guarded hotel rooms.

All I have to do, way or replaying the favour, is listen to him talk, run those errands. He likes jazz by white men and the fucking Beatles. Endless speeches about stand up comedians I never heard of. Listen to him practice his set over and over and over, without a change. Try to talk magic but he doesn't care. I read his books when he's asleep.

Wade through celebrity biographies to find the gold but there isn't much. Some Jan Bremmer and Freud's weird book about jokes.

One other reason. Lazlo is famous - magician to the stars. He's not a well-liked or well-remembered man in his day job. But word gets around. *Lazlo knows things. When you're tired of the new school kaballists or the holistic dolphin types and you've got weirdness business, talk to Lazlo.*

Give him this - Lazlo doesn't talk about it. Doesn't tell anecdotes about celebrity exorcisms, whatever he does for 'em. His mania's is for talking comedy and not glad-handing or name-dropping.

Here's where all the listening pays off.

'Do you have a suit, boy?'

'Yeah, not a good one.'

'You're a sorcerer, man! You should look the part at all times!' He's ashed on his blue tuxedo jacket, covered in food stains.

‘Sure.’

He leans forward. Stuffs five hundred dollars into my jacket pocket. ‘Look nice. There’s a job for you tomorrow and you’ll want to look professional.’

### III

She’s very beautiful, the client. Recognise her from somewhere but don’t show it. She’s not here for an interview. Lazlo tells me she used to be in bands, got into movies. Don’t figure it for my scene. Don’t really know her work.

Wearing my new suit with my hair all cut. Effect undone by meeting in a tiny hotel room. Cheap. Water stains on the ceiling. Draught under the door. Formica floors. Hear a sound a few rooms down. Weeping. Just weeping.

She bought someone but he waits outside. Whenever they bring someone and they have a weirdness to discuss, the support just turns into a censor. This will be something she takes serious. My job to figure out if it’s for real.

Actress. Can’t remember her name. Take out a notepad.

‘I’m Lark. You be whoever you like. I know you reached out to Lazlo but he can’t take the job. There’s just me. You can come at it straight, tell me what you like. The weird is the job so we’ll take it serious.’

Her eyes are calm. Measuring. Put down the pen and stare back. There’s nothing in me to be used up by beauty. I just want the gig.

*Scarlet.*

‘I doubt you’ve heard this one, Mr. Lark.’

‘Just Lark is fine, Ms...’

‘You can call me Ava.’

‘Ava, if you’re in this chair, you’ve come across something that requires the kind of specialist who isn’t on anyone’s speed dial. It’s okay. Just talk to me.’

She sniffs, doesn't relax. Takes a long slim cigarette from her purse. I slide my zippo across the table and light up on my own. Wait patient. I'm good at patient. Sometimes they need a run-up.

'I'm having problems with an ex, Lark.'

This isn't my bag. I'm not a private detective or muscle. Not the right man to deal with a famous person's stalker. Lazlo knows that, which means I need to wait. I smoke, waiting for her to come to it.

'I have an ex-boyfriend who I need to get rid of. I can't... I don't have access to legal channels here.'

Nod. 'That's easy. I don't do punishment jobs but I can make him forget you, scare him off or we have other techniques.'

'Not like that Lark. It's not that simple.'

Wait. Look down. She takes a minute. Gets to it. Look up.

'My ex-boyfriend is the Devil, Mr. Lark.'

**LARK WILL RETURN IN**  
**GHOST CITY**