

THE DEVIL

KEN BRUEN



ALSO BY KEN BRUEN

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The Devil

KEN BRUEN



Minotaur Books  New York

For Martin Quinn, our best mayor, and Mark Roberts, our best singer-songwriter.

The Divil – Irish pronunciation of the Devil, used as a figure of fun, or with more than a slight sense
of trepidation.

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Prologue

'Nightmares are the dress rehearsal for the dread awaiting.'

KB

I should be in America.

Tried.

Jaysus wept. Did I ever?

Went to the airport.

Bought my duty-free.

Doing good, right?

Had my one suit on, the black job that had seen too many funerals.

White shirt, muted tie.

I like that...*muted*.

Seems almost like a Brit.

Dark one I bought in the charity shop.

I was Xanaxed to the hilt, so mellow I certainly was.

Headed for Homeland Security.

American Immigration.

Seemed to be doing OK, did the eyeballing job, stared into that security camera, then did the index-finger job.

‘Now sir, your left hand.’

And you’re trying not to sweat like a bastard.

That icy politeness puts me on alert.

Not even 10 mg of Xanax can stop that.

Then the hesitation.

And the dreaded words, ‘Could you step to the side, sir?’

You’re fucked.

Seems my past was up there, a brief stay in jail when I put a child-beating bollix through a glass window.

I don’t regret that, didn’t then, don’t now.

I was sorry it was on record.

Then I was told I could re-apply for entry to the USA, but for now, sayonara.

The looks from the other passengers, looks of ‘Thank fuck it’s not me.’

Reclaiming my luggage, returning the duty-free, need I say how that felt?

Shame.

No worse feeling in the whole damn universe.

I finally got back to the general population.

Yeah, just like prison.

I did what you do when you are humiliated.

What I do, anyway.

I went to the bar.

Hadn’t been drinking for nigh on six months.

The bar guy would just have to be an asshole.

That kind of day.

Ignored me for ten minutes.

~~And I seethed.~~

Watched him polish glasses, wipe down the counter, and finally,

Golly gosh,

He noticed me.

Opened with,

‘What would sir’s pleasure be?’

His balls for openers.

I went with,

‘Double Jameson, no ice, pint of the black.’

I figure something in my tone backed him off and he said,

‘Of course.’

I drained the Jay, fast and furious.

Good title for a movie, I thought.

Sat back and waited for the hit.

It came.

The warmth in your belly, the creeping illusion that everything might be OK.

Why you drink the shite, I suppose.

The best bit then.

As it snuggles up in your gut, you take the head off the Guinness.

The bar guy might be a prick but he sure could pour a pint.

Nowadays, we had so many non-nationals in the service industry, they poured a pint of G like a pint of friggin’ lager.

This guy knew his stuff, had let it sit for nigh on four minutes before he creamed the head.

I let out my breath.

Hadn’t even known I’d been holding it for six months.

You’re a dry alcoholic, that’s how you live.

And this is wrestling with the Xanax, you’re going to get some moments of reprieve.

Take it where you park it.

I hadn’t even known a guy had slid on to the stool beside me, till he spoke.

Going,

‘Sure is hell here today.’

I was mellow enough now to turn and look at him.

Tall slender man, in a beautiful suit.

You been shopping in charity shops as long as I have, you know the real deal.

This was it.

Armani or some other way-out-of-my-reach number.

The kind of suit, you kick the be-jaysus out of it, it’s still there in the morning, like a faded butler, looking prim and proper.

He had long hair, blond with highlights, and, I’d have to admit, a handsome face, but something...off.

Maybe the mean, down-turned mouth.

I’d seen enough of them to know they are very bad news.

And obviously he worked out, you could see the toned muscle behind the shining white shirt.

He had a devastating smile, marred a little by two crooked teeth.

And his cologne, top of the range I’m sure, but underneath, something else, like garlic left too long in the sun.

I nodded.

And he asked,

‘Travelling today?’

I wanted to say,

‘The fuck is it to you?’

but the Xanax, mixing with the booze, said,

‘No, change of plans.’

He gave that killer smile again, said,

‘Ah, that’s a sin.’

His emphasis on *sin* was, I swear, deliberate.

He had the bar guy hopping, no mean feat, ordered a gin and tonic and then, to me,

‘Get you something, Jack?’

I said I was good.

Fuck, I was close to lights out but not quite out of it, asked,

‘How’d you know my name?’

Ravishing smile and he indicated my dead ticket on the bar, said,

‘Says so on your ticket.’

Then he gave a tiny smile, said,

‘I met a guy on the plane, you know how it goes, you have a drink or two and get to shoot the shit?’

He paused to see if I was following this.

How difficult was it?

I nodded and he continued,

‘This guy was a shrink, and you’ll laugh when you hear this, he studied evil.’

I didn’t laugh.

He went on,

‘So I asked him, you think there is a motive for evil?’

He gauged my response and, seeing nothing special, said,

‘The guy tells me evil hones in on those closest to redemption.’

Time for my two cents. I said,

‘Lets me off the hook then.’

He gave me the most eerie look, asked,

‘You’re beyond redemption, Jack?’

Jesus, we were having a drink and he was getting not only theological but downright fucking personal.

I said, letting my bitterness leak all over my words,

‘Let me just say, experience has taught me there’s no such thing as a free lunch. Or drink, either.’

He made a sound – I blame the booze, the disappointment of non-entry to America, but it seemed like fucking...*glee*.

He said,

‘I would imagine if evil were zoning in on a person, you’d be the ideal candidate. You have all the requirements for where evil would nest and multiply. Bitterness, disbelief, and a cynical disregard for how such things work.’

I’ve been around bad guys for a lot of years, some serious whacko jobs, the sociopaths, the psychos, the totally insane. And yet this guy gave me a sense of ‘You ain’t seen nothing yet!’

But like I said, the blend of stuff in my stomach was keeping me loose. I went with,

‘Fascinating as this might appear, I’m not really in the mood for *The Garden of Good and Evil*.’

never got your name.'

~~He laughed, a sound like a hyena with meat in its mouth, said, extending his long slender hand,~~
'I'm Curt.'

I thought he meant his manner – and he was certainly that – till he added,

'With a K.'

Almost mesmerized by the intensity of his eyes, I echoed,

'Kurt?'

He tossed his long blond tresses, and I mean tossed, said,

'*Absolument.*'

Like I gave a fuck. I was thinking Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, but being too obvious is never smart so I went with,

'We met before?'

He took a long swig of his gin, savoured it, then said,

'If we had, surely you'd remember?'

I had no reply to this, signalled the barman to hit me again. Kurt said,

'My treat, please.'

I let him...treat.

My drinks came and I raised the Jay, said,

'*Slainte.*'

He seemed amused by that, asked,

'That's Irish?'

The tone was as the Brits might say, *sardonic*.

And the feeling he was fucking with me I put down to the booze, so I countered with,

'You're...?'

Meaning,

'Irish you ain't.'

And words failed me.

If I had to guess, he sounded French, sort of, but with a complete mastery of English that was amazing.

He let that hover, that damn smile in place, then,

'I'm of mixed ancestry, far too boring for a man like you to have to bear, but I carry a German passport.'

I decided to stay on the vague interrogatory track, asked,

'You on holiday, business? Leaving or arriving?'

He loved that.

I could literally see his eyes dance with merriment, or as my late mother might have said,

'With devilment.'

He said,

'Business, always working, so many tasks awaiting my attention. I'm currently headed for a city called Galway. Are you familiar with this place?'

He wanted to head fuck, I'd oblige, said,

'No.'

Nothing else.

Almost a Zen response, as my sidekick Stewart would appreciate.

He gave me a long look, impossible to decipher, halfway bemusement, the rest, I think, was anger.

Then he said in that so polished accent,

‘A shame, I’ve rented a rather lovely vehicle and if you’d been going to Galway...’

~~And all of a sudden I was tired of him. Checked my watch, the bus...yeah, the bus was about ready to leave. I drained my shot glass, the Guinness following fast.~~

I stood up and he asked,

‘Leaving already?’

I gave him my best look, full of empty promise, said,

‘It’s been a blast.’

Gave it an American twang to shove it home.

He extended that languid hand again and his grip was fierce. He said,

‘I feel we’ll meet again.’

Not if I could fucking help it. I left him with,

‘Then the jar is on me.’

As I walked away, I could feel his eyes boring into me. Jesus, one creepy guy.

I got outside the terminal and noticed an Aer Lingus lady watching me.

Since our national airline, like the rest of the country, was to hell and gone, it was rare to actually see the green uniform, not to mention an Irish person.

She said,

‘I’m sorry to bother you, but are you a friend of the man you were having a drink with?’

The fuck was this?

She read my face, understanding exactly what I was thinking, and continued,

‘Since the difficulties with our company, some of us are assigned to just being on site and helping where we can.’

Unless she could get me to America, she was shite out of luck.

I asked,

‘Is there a point to this?’

She looked mortified in the way only an Irish woman can, that is, shamed yet defiant.

She said,

‘I’ve been monitoring the departures hall for over a year and I can pretty well read faces now, it passes the time, and earlier I noticed that man due to his striking appearance, and then, I hope this doesn’t seem too far fetched, he seemed to zone in on you.’

The bitch was mad, time to get another line of work.

I said, sarcasm all over me words,

‘Stalking me?’

She stared at her feet in pure agony for a moment, then the head came up, jaw strong.

‘And when you passed through Customs, he actually smiled. As if he knew you’d be...re-emerging.’

I gave a bitter laugh, said,

‘He was right.’

She was into it now, a whole conspiracy living in front of her, said,

‘And he tracked you till you went to the bar, then he’s sitting with you.’

I saw the bus approach, tried to keep the irritation to a low, asked,

‘Spit it out, what is it you think is going on?’

She ignored my shot, said,

‘I’d be very careful of people like that, sir. I grew up in West Cork, the old people believed –’

She was seriously mortified now, but soldiered on,

‘– that malevolence is a living, breathing thing and it hovers, waiting for a target, then it latches on, won’t let go till it owns you, and usually it targets people who are sad or disappointed. I know this

sounds crazy, but that man seemed delighted to see you so...despondent.'

~~Christ, no wonder the national airline had gone down the toilet.~~

I asked, a mocking tone evident,

'So, the Devil is hanging out in airports, looking for poor bastards who get refused entry to America? And he's what, going to scoop them up? Jesus, lady, you need to get a grip or some serious medication.'

I hurt her badly, wounded her in fact, but for fuck's sake, I was doing her a favour. Wasn't I? Jesus wept.

I began to move away and she shouted,

'I just thought I should make you aware of the situation. I'm sorry if I sounded odd.'

I gave her a slight smile, nothing too fancy – you can never encourage lunatics – and said,

'Odd? Least you're in the best country for it.'

And oh sweet Jesus, added,

'You need to get out more, take a walk round the car park. You know, get a different perspective.'

I got on the bus, leaving her looking forlorn and lost.

Beyond redemption?

Oddest thing, as the bus swung round to take the turn for Galway, maybe it was a trick of the light, but I thought I saw Kurt pressed up against the glass entry door, not watching me.

Watching her.

'May you be in heaven a full half-hour before the Devil knows you're dead.'

Old Irish blessing

Lucifer.

The Light Bringer.

He was the Angel of light.

He believed that man had seriously fucked up.

So, like a good cop, he collected his evidence, brought it to His Lord.

The Lord, being God, like all governments, was highly sceptical and laughed at his bearer of light.

Truly pissed off, like all good cops, Lucifer began to falsify the evidence.

An early fan of *The Wire*, if you will.

Not so much Serpico as Satan.

And yeah, got fucked over.

So he did what you do when you get caught, you rally the guys.

Set up his own shit.

Not quite Mugabe, but he was getting there. His coup failed.

No wonder the Irish have such belief in him.

Failed rebellions.

What we do best.

He was, as they put it, thrown into hell.

And like all former zealots, he swore,

‘The fuck I’m going down alone.’

And you kinda have to admire the cojones of the guy. Not only was he taking his motley crew of failed cohorts to hell and beyond, he’d go after God’s supposedly mega love.

The Human Race.

He’d enlist:

Idi,

Adolph,

Maggie Thatcher,

And for a pure Trivial Pursuit (even arch demons need recreation) somewhere on the list of crazed cronies he added the name of

Taylor, Jack.

Just for a spot of diversion.

The guy went around with guilt,

fear,

anger,

spite,

arrogance.

And best of all, he was a half-assed recovering Catholic.

Not only would it give Luc some R and R, he’d get to drink some Jameson, sink a few pints of Guinness and, primarily, watch the stupid bollix try to figure it out.

Where was the downside?

Most diabolical of all, Taylor would look for motivation. That made the Devil laugh out loud. He loved the game most when humans sought explanations and motivation.

Reminded him of wondrous times, like that idiot Aleister Crowley.

And if he knew Taylor, and he sure knew a sitting target, sooner or later, Taylor would do two really stupid acts.

Apart, of course, from trying to understand it.

Taylor would do two incredibly dumb acts.

One: he'd go to a priest.

And by all that is unholy, the priest would feel the wrath of meddling with the Anti-Christ.

And then the tinkers.

Luc had a special hatred for them as the weird clan could see things.

He didn't like that.

Not to be seen.

If there was to be a show time, he'd call the time and place.

Mostly, he worried (if such an entity could worry) about them because, unlike Taylor, or priests or the other minions, they weren't afraid.

He thrived on fear.

His *raison d'être*, perhaps.

And if Taylor did follow through, with the tinkers, he'd lay such a wrath on them that they'd huddle in the fear he had tried so long to instil in them.

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