



**A STITCH
IN CRIME**

JUSTIN ROBINSON

...FOUR PEOPLE MOSEYED IN.

Headless horsemen, all of them. Hard to mistake those, even when their demonic steeds weren't around. The one in the lead was the shortest of them, and more than a head shorter than me, no pun intended. His western-style shirt was tucked into a tight pair of blue jeans crowned with a thick belt buckle that glittered silver. His cowboy boots were scuffed with use and tipped in more silver. A bowie knife hung on his belt, the handle bone, the blade thick and heavy with promised murder.



PRAISE FOR A STITCH IN CRIME

Robinson's tale is a treasure trove of monstrous delights and, despite Jane's gruesome origins, she proves an endearing lead. With its heady blend of noir and campy horror, this rollicking adventure doesn't disappoint. — *Publishers Weekly*

With this atmospheric and exciting, yet also deeply moving, new chronicle of the City of Devils—now a Country of Devils—Justin Robinson has expanded his monsteriffic crime noir world and brought us an amazing new perspective on it.

— Kate Sherrod, creator of *Pulp Sonnets*

As with all of Robinson's books, I loved the scene setting, the world-building details, the vibrant cast of characters, the pitch-perfect deadpan noir dialogue, and, of course, the jokes. // Hands down a stellar addition to the City of Devils series.

— A. J. Sikes, author of the *Redemption* trilogy

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***A STITCH
IN CRIME***

JUSTIN ROBINSON



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For the Owl and the Turtle

ONE

The hole was the size of my fist. Big enough to fit my whole life inside. It poked through the plaster, fractured the wooden bones of the living room wall. Fault lines of cracked paint haloed it. The hole was the first thing I saw when I opened my front door, and the last thing I thought of before my two hours of sleep at night. Two hours, not enough even for a meat golem like me. I tried to look away, ignore it, pretend it wasn't there. I couldn't. It was a gouged-out eye staring at me. Daring me to face it.

It had been there for a week. No—it was there before I punched it in. Waiting for the rage that would reveal it. I'd been pretending it was a clean, unbroken wall. That there was no hole for me to fall into. That the life I wanted, that I thought I was living, wasn't balanced on a precipice.

In the split second it took to put that hole there, everything went into it. Lost forever. The rest of my days to think about it, to hate myself, to wallow in regret.

The worst part was, I didn't even remember doing it. In my mind, I existed perched on a rock surrounded by a roiling green sea. The waves never stopped crashing in, and sometimes I went under, the green closing in over my head. While my mind drowned, I was the oldest story in a

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young book. Another dizzy skin-dolly about to put someone in the hospital. It happened from time to time no matter how much I wanted to keep it at bay. Someone getting a little too fresh, the sound of that slur “skin-dolly,” or even just a misplaced comment. The waves thundered higher and higher until I couldn’t keep my head above water. Then I was gone.

There were a couple things that could lower the water, at least. Ella Fitzgerald songs. Wind blowing through the leaves of trees. Old paperbacks. And one person in particular.

The worst part of the hole was that it wasn’t there because some phantom decided I was his true love and he was going to put his hands on me. No, it came in a razor-blade instant when I nearly killed the one person who could normally make that water fall faster than the mercury in an icebox. The only safe person in all the world.

Nick.

That’s Nick Moss, the only human private eye in town. My boyfriend. Or he had been my boyfriend until it all went away in a crash of green. He’d said something about my birthday. I don’t even remember what. Didn’t matter. Those waves had been getting higher and higher all week, and I was going to break the next person who said “fire.”

I pushed my head above the green, gasping for air, and there Nick was, cowering under the hole, plaster dust drifting over him like the snow Los Angeles would never see. He clutched his lighter in his hand, the tiny flame like a blade spearing my borrowed heart. I found myself hissing like a whole alley full of cats as I scrambled backward. Then I put the pieces of the last few seconds together.

The hole. The fear in Nick’s eyes. The fire he’d never, ever pull on me.

I had almost hit Nick. Had I connected, he’d be dead. My Nick, and I’d almost killed him. In an instant when the piece of me that truly deserved the name “monster” was in charge. I wanted to explain, to apologize, but I had no voice. My slate was out of reach. So I could only stare at Nick, more frightened than he was. And then he was gone.

I stared at the hole as though I could make him reappear beneath

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it and we could pretend it never happened. We could go back to what we were, finding love that no one wanted to be real. Between a living man and a woman made from the dead. Make believe we could be together. That we were normal. That there was nothing wrong with me. And know it was that pretending that put the hole there in the first place.

I picked at the stitches between the middle and ring fingers of my right hand. They had been loose for years, and that punch had jarred them something fierce. The two patches of skin they bridged were different colors, one sort of greenish, the other kind of gray, and they were coming undone, like a zipper. The flesh underneath was frayed and bloodless, like a bolt of cloth ripped in two. I knew I should try to restitch them, but every time I sat down to do it, I found myself staring at the hole, desperately trying not to see the space beneath it, where Nick wasn't and would never be again.

Hell of a birthday present, too. Nearly kill the only man who didn't treat me like a joy girl or a stitched-up pile of corpses. Happy fifth birthday, Jane Stitch.

Yes, I was five years old. Kind of. Not really. It's hard to explain. See, meat golems get made, the same as other monsters, out of people. But with every other monster, it's a one-for-one ratio. With us, it's six corpses: five for the body and one for the brain. We're a new person, but we still have a few things left over from the old. Like old voices on a tape recording. I didn't have to be taught to read, or to eat, or even to drive. I just knew all of those things. I even knew who the president was, that the handsome fella in *Notorious* was Cary Grant, and that I shouldn't buy the Brooklyn Bridge, no matter how good a deal the nice man was offering. I also knew a creep when I saw one, which might have saved me in the first moment I opened my eyes.

So I was five, but it was a hard five. A worn-out five. A five that didn't want to deal with the memories bounding around her noggin, and who wanted to pretend that she could have a life with a strange little man who loved her.

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What a joke, right?

That touch of verdigris in my complexion said it all. I was a monster, and monsters don't get happy endings. Nothing Nick would have said could have justified me hitting him and he certainly never did anything to send me under. I'd lost time before, more often than I cared to admit, but when it happened, there was usually a spark. Like I said, the green waves would close up over me and I'd wake up mashing some phantom's head into the pavement.

But no. This time, my Nick had simply opened his mouth about my birthday and I'd nearly killed him for it.

My birthday. September 15, 1951. Five years since the night a sizzling bolt of lightning shot white-hot life into me. Since my eyes opened and I was a new kind of person. Five years since I started running from that life and only stopped when I'd run out of land. Five years since I'd left sand for tinsel.

The hole, yawning across the living room, got bigger and bigger as I watched it. The edges crumbled away, the hole devouring everything around it. Then, in the middle, where the wood in the walls broke like ribs, a spot opened so black no light would ever get out. Not even the black of the night. No, this was a black that didn't exist in the deepest parts of the war, when monsters chattered in the dark. This was the black of anti-light, of anti-life. I'd punched my way to it, and now it wanted to swallow me, frayed stitches first.

Even as the chemicals running through my veins turned cold, I realized what I had to do. There was nothing for me until I did it, and I'd been avoiding it for five years. Five years too long.

I had to stop running.

Two

No one would have said Nick was much of a looker. Truth is, he looked a bit like a weasel. Short, shifty, and a little furry. But, as the saying almost went, he was my weasel. Only he wasn't, not anymore.

I had one picture of him, creased from its home in my wallet. He hated pictures of himself; he said he didn't like what he saw. I thought at first it was vanity, but it wasn't. Once, when he'd had a little too much to drink, he told me everything. Told me the things he saw in the Day War, the things he'd done in the Night. Listed all the lives between D-Day and this one, and he remembered each and every face. Told me about all the people he'd let down, too, those he couldn't find or the ones he'd found too late. They still whispered to him when he closed his eyes. Nick had a ledger in his mind, and he was always in the red.

"I don't like what I see here," he'd said, pointing to his eyes with wavering fingers.

I held him until he was counting sheep. Then I held him for longer because I had to. When I looked into his eyes, I didn't see failure. I saw the man who stopped me from burning. I saw the man who wouldn't leave

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justice to someone else if he could find it. And I saw the man who would never see that in the mirror.

In the picture, he was asleep on my couch. Funny, because that was how we'd met. Well, we'd actually met a couple times before that, but that was the first time we'd really talked. I'd pulled him out of a beating at the hands of three gangsters and brought him to my place as a thank you for saving me from a fire. That old story. When he woke up, he thought I was going to turn him. He didn't know then that I'd never turn anybody. That I was nearly as scared as he was. For all I knew, he was a gangster too, one of Mickey Cohen's boys. And unlike every other mug in the City of Angels, he didn't have a fear or a weakness to prey on. I'd taken off his jacket, heavy with wards, herbs, and weapons, and hung it on a hook like a leopard I wasn't sure was dead or not. These were the weapons of a killer.

But he had stopped me from burning.

The picture had been taken on a Sunday in May. He was in his shirtsleeves, arms crossed over his chest, mouth slack, eyes closed. Peaceful. That had taken him a month or two. Even with me, he often shuddered in his sleep, or woke up in a flash, ready to fight. Like most meat golems, I don't sleep much, so I was awake for all of it. Then, slowly, he started getting more and more comfortable with me. It got harder for him in his neighborhood. The other humans called him a real Christine Daaé—you know, the dame from *Phantom of the Opera*—for taking up with a monster, and he preferred to stay at my place. I did too. The other monsters looked at us funny, sure, but they all assumed I was playing some kind of long game. I wasn't. I had the Nick I wanted, and he had the Jane he wanted.

My finger traced a greenish path over Nick's face as the red car rattled into Hollywood. I wondered where he was. Probably at his tiny office on Flower Street. Nick was more like the private eyes in the books than he wanted to admit. His secretary, a siren by the name of Serendipity Sargasso, was so nice that I thought she was putting me on at first. Nope, it turned out she was just happy that Nick was happy. That made me like her. And now she probably hated me. With good reason.

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I wanted to go see him, but I couldn't. I was the same person who'd thrown the punch. I couldn't see him until that danger was past. Until I'd never raise a hand to Nick or anyone else who didn't deserve it. Until I was me.

Whoever that was.

The red car dropped me off in Hollywood, on Sunset. Daytime had stripped the glamor away, and it left a street looking like a party after everyone had gone home. Two vampires walked by, shielded by their parasols, eyes hidden behind chunky dark glasses.

My destination was the art deco façade a block away, the one marked THE NOCTURNIST. Even the defining nightspot of the Sunset Strip looked sad in the light of day, a thin layer of smog hovering over it in a haze. I went through the front. Unlocked as always. Anyone who came into the Nocturnist looking to cause trouble was going to get far more than they could ever dish out.

The antechamber was empty; Hargoth wouldn't get in until an hour before sundown. Just as well—he tended to think the waitresses here might like to make some time with an ogre. Some of the girls did, and the rest of us just had to put up with what an ogre thought were clever come-ons. I opened up the inner door, and the sounds of the Salem Sisters fluttered out.

My heart flopped over. They'd been Nick's find. Three gorgeous witches in perfect close harmony. I might have been a little jealous of them at first, but I wasn't going to admit it, and Nick never let on they were anything but friends. They were rehearsing, the club's nearly all-phantom orchestra behind them. It was a hell of a sound, and one I'd never gotten over. A side benefit to working here.

I passed them by, going up the stairs by the back of the stage. A few more twists and turns led me to a staircase heading down into the basement suite of rooms Nyx Nocturne used as an office. The staircase was narrow, and I clomped my way down to the bottom and knocked on her door.

The slide over the peephole hissed open and a jaundiced eye crawled

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over me. Then the door opened, revealing a slender ghoul, baring snaggleteeth. She wore a suit top with a flared skirt and boots that looked like she should be tromping around the Night War. She carried a gun, but she wasn't pointing it anywhere. This was Holly Thorne, Miss Nocturne's majordomo.

"Jane. What do you want?" Holly asked. "Not dressed for work."

I wasn't. Shorts, a checked t-shirt tied at my waist, and a scarf corralling my hair weren't exactly Nocturnist wear. My shoes were flats, too. Plus, I was wearing my slate like the world's least fashionable necklace. Made me look like a schoolkid from thirty years ago, but it was the most effective way I knew to talk to anyone who wasn't also a lady meat golem. It was just a framed bit of blackboard hung around my neck with a piece of twine, a stick of chalk hanging from a second piece. It was also verboten at the Nocturnist. Destroyed the glamorous image here, of whistlebait who couldn't talk back.

I wrote on the slate, *Need to speak to Miss Nocturne.*

"Miss Nocturne's sleeping. You know that," Holly said.

I resisted the urge to make only real sound I could: an angry hiss. Holly was lying through her broken teeth. Miss Nocturne wasn't sleeping because it was still early enough she'd be totaling the receipts from last night. She wasn't going to catch a wink before she was damn sure nobody's finger was in the till.

Please, Miss Thorne. I showed her, then wiped it away with the heel of my hand and wrote, *It's business.*

The ghoul sighed, then stepped aside, gesturing to the room. "I'll get her, but don't expect her to be in the friendliest of moods."

Nyx Nocturne being friendly to an employee would have been a first. I walked in, but couldn't sit. My limbs always felt too long to me, like they belonged to someone else. They did, I suppose, but they'd been mine long enough you'd think I'd be used to them by now. So I stood in the middle of the room, shifting coltishly on stolen legs while I waited for Miss Nocturne.

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I had to give it to her; the room was lovely. She'd kept with the decor of the rest of the place, trying to pretend this was some old-world castle in the haunted woods of Transylvania. The furniture was all heavy stained wood; the walls looked like stone, hung with woven tapestries. Of course, instead of the Battle of Hastings, the tapestries showed the Night War, except how it might look to some medieval artist.

Nyx Nocturne herself swept into the room, keeping me waiting only long enough that it wasn't a question about who was in charge. In a nod to what she was supposed to be doing, she was wearing an elegant dressing gown, but her coal-black hair was still in its lacquered side part from the evening, and her gold eyes were as bright as a newly polished British sovereign.

"Jane, yes. What can I do for you?"

I wrote on the slate with a jittery hand, wishing I'd done it while she was out of the room. I felt the vampire's attention on me, heavier than a lead weight. *I need time off.*

"Time off? I didn't know meat golems got sick."

Not sick. Personal difficulties.

Nyx Nocturne raised a perfectly sculpted eyebrow. "Perfectly sculpted" described the whole package. She really did look like an ivory statue someone had painted only sparingly, black over her hair, gold over her eyes, crimson on her lips, and nothing anywhere else. "Personal?"

I nodded, wondering if she was going to pry any further. I couldn't cough up the truth to anybody but a good friend. But lying to a vampire was tough under the best circumstances. It's why they made such great lawyers.

"How much time?"

I shrugged, giving her my best "I'm not sure" face.

"I see," she said, considering. "Take what you need, but your job isn't going to be waiting for you forever. There are a lot of girls with stitches in this town who need jobs, and this is a good one. If you're back in a couple days, maybe a week, you'll have it. Longer? No promises."

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I understand. Thank you, Miss Nocturne.

“Use the time well.”

I left her office behind, but I wasn't going to leave the club quite yet. There was one person I needed to talk to. Needed to talk to her more than I did with Nyx Nocturne, in fact. I passed through the club, where the Salem Sisters were taking five. Two, the maiden and mother, sat at the edge of the stage, while the platinum blonde crone was having a low conversation with the cornet player. “Crone” was a bit of a misnomer; Hyacinth Salem couldn't have been older than her mid-twenties. Their familiars, a robin, a blue jay, and a sparrow, perched on the microphone stand singing their own little ditty.

None of the other girls were in yet. That made it easier. We were friends, united by our shared experiences. We talked in a sign language only meat golem women knew. We'd teach it to the new ones in a sacred trust. No one else spoke it; I don't think most monsters even knew we had our own way of communicating. They might have understood what I had to do...or they might not, and I'd feel even more alone than I already did.

I opened up the door to the kitchen, where the ovens were just starting to be heated up. The head chef, Wyeth Wyrd, issued orders to her staff of zombies, calling them “dear” and “honey.” Next to her, a raccoon stood on its hind legs, its gestures mimicking those of its master.

A confused frown rippled over Wyeth's features as she saw me. “Jane? What are you doing here so early? You're not dressed for work.”

Taking some time off.

“Miss Nocturne let you?” I wobbled my hand at her in a more or less gesture. “What's going on, dear? You look perturbed.”

I glanced around. More than one of the zombies was surreptitiously watching us. While I didn't mind Wyeth knowing, I didn't really want an entire kitchen staff gossiping about me, even if all they could say was “Brains.”

Wyeth read me perfectly, like she always did, and ushered me to the little alcove by the back door. The raccoon clambered onto the counter and watched the zombies, his furry paws on his Rubenesque hips.

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“Now, what is it, dear?” Wyeth murmured.

Going back, I wrote. Then, hesitating, I wrote another word. *Home*.

“Where is home?”

Arizona. I didn’t get any more specific than that. Most people hadn’t heard of the place I’d been sewn together. They were better for it, as far as I was concerned.

“Why? Did something happen?”

My stomach flopped over. Wyeth knew Nick, but she didn’t know why I was so hung up on him. As far as she was concerned, he was the crazy human who came into the Nocturnist, practically daring any of the monsters present to turn him. Still, I didn’t want to say, because I didn’t want her to diminish what I’d done. I didn’t want her to try to comfort me.

I need to talk to my creator.

“You’ve never spoken about...him?” I nodded. “What do you want to ask him?”

Everything. I need to know who

I stopped writing. It was nearly impossible to get out. I forced myself; not answering was the same as running and I was done running.

I need to know who I was.

Wyeth’s gaze fell to the train tracks of stitches that ran over my body. “I see,” she said. “You know, if the memories are troubling you, I have hexes that can make you forget.”

I shook my head and tapped the need on my slate. She thought it over. “Be careful, Jane. Who you were and who you are are different people.”

I erased everything except *I know*.

“I can tell there’s nothing I can say that’ll talk you out of this, so instead, I’ll just tell you good luck. Now come here.” Wyeth wrapped me up in a hug. It would have been so easy to quit right there. To surrender to it and let her comfort me, let her be the mother I’d never had. Let her take the pain away. But I deserved that pain. Needed it, even.

I parted from her and nodded. It was all I could say.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Much like film noir, Justin Robinson was born and raised in Los Angeles. He splits his time between writing and taking care of a small human. Degrees in Anthropology and History prepared him for unemployment, but an obsession with horror fiction and a laundry list of phobias provided a more attractive option. He is the author of more than 15 novels in a variety of genres including noir, humor, fantasy, science fiction, and horror. Most of them are pretty good.

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