



# UNWITCH HUNT

**JUSTIN ROBINSON**



## **HEXENE BROKE INTO A RUN WITHOUT THINKING.**

Technika called to her and was quickly outpaced. The word came again, terror cutting through it like a blade. Other words came after, and these were in hissed Theban. A makeshift hex, and as soon as Hexene heard the syllables, they started a thrumming in her belly. She might not be able to reach her magic anymore, but her body knew the feel of it. She rounded the last corner between her and it, and found three maidens closing around the giant Mafaufau, chanting, one holding a doll, one a piece of chalk, the third a pouch. The terrified zombie had backed up against a wall, his arms up as though to ward them off. They looked like a trio of leopards closing in on a wounded elephant.



## **PRAISE FOR UNWITCH HUNT**

With this fun fantasy, Robinson expands the world of his City of Devils series... // Robinson leavens the mystery with a lot of humor // and a charming heroine. This adventure is sure to delight with its embrace of being oneself whether others accept it or not. — *Publishers Weekly*

Just as Jane ruled the American Southwest in *A Stitch in Crime*, Hexene Candlemas shines for *Unwitch Hunt*. — Kate Sherrod, creator of Pulp Sonnets

Justin Robinson has yet again sent one sailing out of the park, over the stands, and somewhere into the neighboring county. — A. J. Sikes, author of the Redemption trilogy

## **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*

## **PRAISE FOR WOLFMAN CONFIDENTIAL**

Robinson's writing is a delightful cross between H.P. Lovecraft and Raymond Chandler, and it revels in its oddities and dark tones. His eye for detail and entertaining side characters (a cornucopia of monsters that have overrun L.A. and often speak in tongue-in-cheek one-liners) create a delightfully rich atmosphere that the reader can plunge into. — *Publishers Weekly*

## **PRAISE FOR FIFTY FEET OF TROUBLE**

Once again, Justin Robinson provides an engaging and entertaining romp through the world of noir Los Angeles post-monster war. He's hilarious, his characters are endearing and boy, can he weave a mystery. — Ashley Perkins, *Game Vortexer*

## **PRAISE FOR CITY OF DEVILS**

Robinson crafts a uniquely interesting world that is sure to please horror, science fiction, and mystery fans alike. — *Minneapolis Books Examiner*



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# ***UNWITCH HUNT***

***JUSTIN ROBINSON***



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For the Owl and the Turtle



# ONE

**I**n a sane world, in a *just* world, Hexene Candlemas would be flying under her own steam, on her own broom, through her own clouds. Of course, the world was neither sane nor just. She didn't know what kind of plane she was imprisoned inside, but she didn't need to know its name to resent it. She resented the way it rattled and shook. Resented the way it stank of every monster that had ever been crammed inside. Resented the way the seats made her ass go partly numb. More than anything, resented having to be on it at all.

She couldn't fly, not anymore. Hence the cursed plane. It wasn't *actually* cursed, unfortunately. She'd lost *that* ability, too. Lost every last scrap of magic clinging to her soul, except for the one trick of being able to dissolve completely in water. She'd gotten to hang onto that one. Lucky her.

This plane was actually the second in a long day of travel. The second on this trip and the second she'd ever been on in her life. She had no idea how humans had handled this for so many years, or how monsters could handle it now. The first plane had been a huge passenger jet, thundering from Los Angeles to Santiago. From there, she'd had to switch to a smaller plane, one with twin coughing propellers, for the final journey to Las Brujas. Hexene thought the first plane had been the absolute nadir of her

**JUSTIN ROBINSON**

existence. Now, stuffed into a vehicle barely larger than its contents, she knew exactly what it felt like to be toothpaste. It was an important lesson the world kept teaching her: no matter how low one fell, there was always a lower place waiting.

The lowest place *should* have been the loss of her familiar. That was the worst thing that could happen to any witch, something her coven had warned her of as soon as she had incarnated her toad from the raw stuff of magic. Turned out there were indignities to be heaped on top of the gnawing grief. Every monster stared. Some whispered. The worst made *Oh, poor thing* faces. The Candlemas Coven were obviously witches, but what were witches doing on an airplane? Stare long enough, and the mystery would be solved. There were no familiars, no toads, or turtles, or salamanders, or songbirds, or ravens, or foxes, sitting in laps or sleeping in satchels or clutched against bosoms. Other monsters might not get *how* important familiars were, but they knew enough to note their absence.

Every time a monster made the connection, every time Hexene saw the understanding dawning in a fresh eye, she felt the loss anew. Her hand went to the empty place in her satchel and she found only an aching hole where there should have been a mildly grumpy toad. She was right back to being a kid again, little perpetually-bullied *Canela*.

*Canela*, for her red hair. Some witches changed colors when they turned, but Hexene came by her coppery curls naturally. They were an unruly mass on top of her head, and had been since the moment she was born. Her eyes were large, green, and usually looked like there was something nefarious going on behind them. Her face had a pugnacious cast to it, with round, freckled cheeks and an upturned nose. When she wasn't thinking about her expression, her face screwed up into a surly ball. She wasn't especially tall, and she was as skinny as a collection of reeds. She wore a dress that looked like an Amish quilt along with heavy brown leather boots. Her satchel, looking much the same as her boots, completed the ensemble, heavy with all the various magical accoutrements she could no longer use.

## ***UNWITCH HUNT***

She attempted to lean back in her seat, only to be annoyed again when the thing stubbornly refused to recline. Next to her, Hermosa stared out the window. The crone's thoughts would be a mystery until she said something that would inevitably be biting. For now, though, she didn't speak a word, instead thoughtfully chewing on nothing at all. With her green skin, hunched back, and copious warts, their crone looked like a Halloween witch. Her patchwork dress was exclusively in dark colors.

Across the aisle, Hechalé hummed and knitted. Hechalé was more or less what one pictured when the word "mother" came up. She was tiny and round, with gray-streaked black hair and dark eyes. Her dress was made in a similar fashion as Hexene's—made by Hexene, in fact—and her shoes were simple slippers. Nothing seemed to touch the mother of the Candlemas Coven. Maybe it was because she still had people, so she hadn't lost everything when the familiars died. Back at LAX, before boarding the plane to Chile, Hechalé had said goodbye to her husband and her kids.

Hexene knew it would be expected of her, too, once she was officially the mother of the Candlemas Coven, to get married and have children. She didn't necessarily have to bear them—adoption was fine—but children were required. One had to embody her role in the triad, after all. In the embodiment there was power. Every time she tried to imagine the specifics, though, she found herself looking forward to skipping the mother part altogether. Being a crone sounded much more fun. She liked the idea of kids being afraid of her.

But watching Hechalé embrace Héctor and Lourdes and Francisco and Simón, Hexene felt the grip of the green-eyed monster. Not her; a different one. She didn't much relish the idea of childbirth, nor did she like the idea of having a husband around always poking his dumb nose where it didn't belong, but some of the side benefits were nice. She wouldn't turn down a small collection of people who genuinely loved her.

Hexene had said goodbye to the kids as well. She had been sort of a young, hep aunt. That had changed a bit when Francisco turned thirteen and started to look at Hexene in a way that no one outside of a Greek

**JUSTIN ROBINSON**

tragedy should look at one's aunt. They weren't technically related, but it was more than close enough to be creepy. Even if she had been interested, he was far too young. Hexene might still look to be a dewy nineteen, but she was over two decades Francisco's senior.

Hechalé's tearful goodbyes drew some gawkers. A lot of younger monsters—and a distressing amount of older ones—didn't know that witches could still make children the old-fashioned way. They weren't even the only monsters who could, but they were the ones who did it most often. It was a reminder to every other monster of one thing: witches were different.

Hexene cradled her satchel on her lap. Escuerzo, her toad, had his own pocket in there. He could ride around and see the world from relative safety, and she could reach in and pet him whenever she had the urge. Giving in to the old instinct just reminded her that he wasn't there anymore. Instead, when her questing fingers expected to find his dry, pebbly skin, they ran into something soft. It took her mind a second to recalibrate itself and remind her that Escuerzo was dead, and she was feeling a pair of dolls she'd fashioned in a fit of uncharacteristic optimism. Just in case she needed to hex the person the doll resembled. Just in case she got her magic back.

One doll was a woman in a figure-hugging red dress. The dress itself was made from satin Hexene had clipped from the original owner, who had probably gotten peeved when she'd discovered the vandalized garment. It was unavoidable; a proper hex doll needed that kind of connection. The red hair was fashioned from feathers, specifically those shed by the owner's red robin familiar. The doll was Lily Salem, the maiden of the Salem Sisters.

The other doll was a small man in a rumpled suit. His hair originally belonged to a weasel. Not *his* weasel—because he didn't have one—but anyone with eyes could see the man's totem within a few seconds of meeting him. Everything else on the doll had been stolen from the man it resembled, one Nick Moss, the last human private eye in the City of Angels.

## **UNWITCH HUNT**

Both hex dolls had been stuffed with a fragrant collection of herbs, cleansed in moonlight and bound with silver laces. They were ready to be used, if there was a witch around with the magic to use them. Hexene liked to think that would be her, should Nick or Lily ever need to be properly hexed, but for now, they were little more than a reminder of what she'd become. Someplace for her hand to go when she needed comfort her familiar couldn't give.

She made them right when she learned the Candlemas Coven was leaving Los Angeles. She'd been collecting the stuff from Nick gradually, and a visit to the Gloom Room, the nightclub where Lily sang with her coven, had taken care of the other. Hexene had barely been aware of her thefts. They had been more or less automatic, a compulsion she didn't want to examine too keenly.

She found out why when she actually stitched the hex dolls together. That sort of action practically demanded a mind sharpened to a knife edge. As she made the dolls resemble as closely as possible the weasel man and the robin woman, the reason she was compelled to do so was revealed in glorious Technicolor: these were her only two friends in the world.

That was sad. Even ignoring the fact that one was only barely a witch and the other was a sweaty little man perpetually on the verge of a nervous collapse, there were only two of them. Hexene's first impulse was a mental protest: *That can't be right*. She started listing acquaintances, one by one, and quickly realized every last one was a client. In a more charitable mood, she might have added the rest of Lily's coven in there, but even though Hyacinth and Verbena weren't traditional examples of their roles, there was enough of a barrier to make Hexene think of them as elders. And she was pretty sure she was older than both of them. So that left only two people in the world who saw her as something other than a provider of spells and hexes. Nick and Lily. Lily and Nick. Two friends in one of the biggest cities in the world. Now all she had left of them were two useless hex dolls. Her hand closed over the pocket, clutching them together.

She glanced around the cabin of the plane for the hundredth time,

**JUSTIN ROBINSON**

noting all of those who'd chosen to come to the city of witches. No actual witches, of course. They would be flying on their own personal airline—on broomsticks or in mortars or in some other device properly covered in flying ointment and inscribed with the correct spells. Instead, she was in this horrifying rattling tube with gremlins, robots, balam, ghouls, and, she noted with reflexive disgust, zombies. Hexene didn't have anything against zombies specifically, but she preferred them at arm's length. Being surrounded by their moans of "Brains" now reminded her of how far she'd fallen.

The one stewardess, an invisible woman whose disembodied uniform curved in such a way to suggest that in the event of a water landing she might be the most effective floatation device available, announced they were beginning their descent into Esbat Airport. Hexene could barely hear her over the chugging engines. Her stomach seized. Not because she was scared of landing—though the idea that this plane *could* land was farfetched—but because she was *there*. In La Ciudad de la Reina de las Brujas, a city made by witches. Once, she had thought of it as the home of her heart, but now it was forbidding, a club she no longer had the password to enter. A club filled with her people—or, rather, those who should be, but were now as far away from her as she was from human.

Of course, it was also the only place in the world she might get her magic back.

She felt Hechalé's motherly comfort on her and she turned, finding the other witch smiling in that way all mothers did. The one that said everything was going to be fine and don't you feel faintly silly for worrying over nothing? "Don't worry, sweetheart," Hechalé said in Spanish. "Everything will be sorted out soon enough."

"You never told me what we had to do." Spanish was Hexene's first language, too, and though she spoke English with no accent anyone could identify, she was slightly more comfortable with her original tongue.

"It's not important," Hechalé said.

"What do you mean, it's not important? Our magic, our familiars, are the most important thing there is!"



## UNWITCH HUNT

The mother smiled sadly. “I was a maiden once, too, and I thought that way.”

The sound Hexene made was halfway between a groan and a growl. Now the smile was infuriating rather than comforting, and it hadn’t changed one iota. “It is important, otherwise we’d still be back in LA.”

“You miss your boyfriend? The little weasel man?”

“He’s not my boyfriend!” Hexene snapped, but her hand closed around the pocket. She wasn’t sure which doll she clutched.

“It’s all right, sweetheart. You’ll be home soon enough. And who knows, Hermosa has been hinting that she might like to *move beyond* soon.” Hechalé delivered the euphemism in a stage whisper and with a superstitious look to either side.

“I can hear you,” Hermosa grunted.

“Of course you can,” the mother soothed. “Your hearing is as good as it ever was.” Hechalé frowned, then found the thread she’d been pulling earlier. “As I was saying, you might need a husband sooner than you think. While your boyfriend might not be to my taste, one assumes everything is working...you know, in his pants.”

Hexene might have been less horrified had Hechalé doused her with a bucket of water. “I have no—!”

“Oh, calm down. I know you don’t have any personal experience in the matter. Otherwise more than one of our hexes would have failed.”

“Please stop speaking.”

“I know. It’s embarrassing to hear your coven’s mother talk about this, but it’s a practical concern. You should have heard Hermosa when I first brought Héctor home. She was keeping track of my moon and tried to schedule the lovemaking so I would conceive.”

“Virgin save me.”

“That’s what I thought too, but what does the Virgin know about that, eh?” Hechalé waggled her eyebrows, then composed herself. “This was before your time, you understand. Our old crone was looking to move beyond, and we hadn’t found you yet. You do not know how happy we were

**JUSTIN ROBINSON**

when we saw your pretty red hair.”

Hexene sighed. “Yes, I do.”

But the mother wasn’t listening. “Only redhead in Guerrero Negro! Only redhead in all of Baja.”

Hexene shook her head. That was patently untrue. Her father and brothers had hair as coppery as hers and her mother’s blonde hair had been strawberry in her youth. Hell of a thing for a fisherman’s family. They burned bright red every summer before getting a thick enough layer of freckles to see them through the fall.

“And you had already started playing at hexes, hadn’t you? If we had left you alone, you would have been your little village’s hedge witch in no time. The point is...what was the point?”

“I haven’t the foggiest.”

“Aha! The relationship of every maiden and mother is difficult, for different reasons. You’re going to be a mother someday, and it isn’t too early to start looking for a man. So long as *looking* is all you do.”

As she felt her face do its best to catch fire, Hexene looked at the options in front of her. She could start a fight over a hypothetical or she could get to an even more salient point. “What does it matter if I’m a mother or not if we don’t have our magic?”

Hechalé sighed. “Being a witch is more than just magic, sweetheart. We are the Many-Faced Goddess made manifest. Embodying our roles isn’t just important, it’s what it means to be a woman.”

“Virgins, mothers, or crones? Those are the only options?”

Hechalé’s eyes hardened for a split second, then turned gooeey. “We are going to get our magic back, Hexene. We will walk in the grace of the Goddess once again, I promise. It will just take some time and effort. Then maybe you’ll be in a better mood and we can talk about our future as a coven and your future with the weasel man. Or someone better looking. Pretty girl like you shouldn’t settle.”

Hexene turned her attention to the back of the seat in front of her. She wasn’t certain she could look at Hechalé without screaming, and she

## ***UNWITCH HUNT***

imagined that screaming was frowned on inside this ridiculous contraption. She reflexively reached into her satchel, fingertips searching for the warty, leathery skin of Escuerzo, but he was dead, if that word even applied to familiars. *Gone* might be a better one.

And Hexene's powers—all the powers of the Candlemas Coven—were gone with him.



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First and foremost, I want to thank Candlemark & Gleam. I will always be grateful for and faintly mystified by their unflagging support of me. As I've expanded the world and told different kinds of stories in the City of Devils universe, C&G remains an enthusiastic partner that I am lucky to have.

I also want to thank Team T-rex, my wife and daughter, for their support. Okay, the kid isn't so much supportive as funny, but I'll take it.

And of course I need to thank the fans of this series. Presumably that's you, holding this very book. You don't have to look around. I'm not watching. I'm not El Mirón. It's been incredible to find so many people on the same wavelength as I am. I hope you enjoy this new chapter of the story, seeing as it's the biggest departure so far. I'd been planning this at least since the outlining phase of the second book, and it's a relief to get it out there. It started life as a novella, but as I got more interested in the unique culture of the witches...it got bigger.

Don't worry, we'll be getting back to Nick soon. He's sweatily waiting in Los Angeles for his next call to adventure. In the meantime, know that every moment I work on City of Devils, I think of all of you. You're awesome. Thank you.





## ***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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