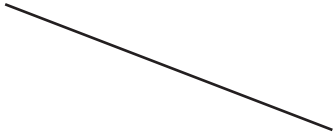


HEX
YOU





SISTERS OF SALEM

HEX YOU

P. C. Cast

Kristin Cast



WEDNESDAY BOOKS
NEW YORK



PROLOGUE

TWO HOURS EARLIER

It would take a while before Jana Ashley felt at peace again. That's what happened when the devil came in. He flipped life upside down and made good, God-fearing Christians question themselves and their beliefs. But God would see her through, and He would be there to guide her.

Jana's glance roamed the sandy shore of Goode Lake behind her and the lone footprints that led to where she now stood.

“ . . . when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you,” she whispered, fresh tears swirling her view of the water's calm blue surface as she clutched her daily devotional to her chest. Her lips moved again, this time in a silent prayer to the lord and savior she knew was always watching.

Another deity was watching, too. A supreme being not at all as forgiving and compassionate as Jana Ashley believed her god to be.

Amphitrite, goddess of the sea and wife of Poseidon—a philanthropic, egotistical, wet blanket of a god (although if anyone spoke about him out of turn, she would quickly fill their lungs with salt water)—stood in the shallow waters near the shore of Goode Lake,

twirling her azure fingertips in the lengths of her skirts. They lapped like waves against her hands and shimmered in the orangey glow of the setting sun, tarpon scales in a crystal-clear sea. She had cloaked herself from this mortal, from *all* mortals. She was an observer, gathering enough evidence to wage war on the witch who had crossed her.

The fresh water around her feet bubbled and popped against her ankles, her anger heating it to a boil. With a deep inhale, she brushed her kelp-brown hair from her shoulders and cast her gaze to the edge of the water and the fluorescent-pink mound not too far in front of Mrs. Ashley. Amphitrite smiled.

Jana adjusted the small, checkered blanket tucked beneath her arm and mindlessly trailed her fingers over the large gold crucifix that rested against the collar of her shirt while she surveyed the curving shoreline ahead for a good place to spread out her throw and settle in for her daily dose of healing. Her brow pinched and her lips thinned as she squinted at the heap of clothes piled up ahead. She gripped her devotional and narrowed her brown eyes on the surface of the lake. If there were skinny-dippers out here, she would catch them. And if the owners of the castoff clothes were in the trees fornicating . . . Well, Jana wasn't quite sure what she would do then, but she knew exactly what the Lord God would have in store for them after their souls had departed this earth.

Seconds ticked by, and then minutes. No naked bodies surfaced.

Jana's cheeks reddened with both embarrassment and outrage as she realized that, unless Goodeville had suddenly been taken over by mermaids (and she would almost believe it with everything she'd seen over the past few days), no one could hold their breath for that long.

"Fornicators!" she spat, tightening her hold on her devotional as she picked up her pace and marched toward the discarded apparel.

City trails and playgrounds surrounded Goode Lake. Volunteers cleaned its beaches weekly. The church held summer camp activities on these shores. This was a good place, a clean place, a family place.

Hex You

This wasn't Chicago, where oversexed heathens could get their jollies in the bushes!

"I'll call the police." She nodded to herself and tugged at her fanny pack as she closed in on the rumpled mound of fabric, any trace of embarrassment overtaken by the wave of self-righteous indignation that swelled beneath her ribs. "Yes, that's exactly what I'll do. And then let's see them explain their sinful actions to the—"

Jana stopped cold. Her copy of *Daily Wisdom for the Devoted Woman* slipped from her grip and hit the wet sand with a *thud*.

Stiff, white hands rested against the water-stained sand, poking out of a highlighter-pink windbreaker like formations of craggy, bleached coral. The unzipped flaps of polyester and baggy hood shuttered in the gentle breeze and hid the wearer's face.

Jana released a shaky exhale as her gaze trailed down the still torso and khaki Bermuda shorts to the bare calves, ghostly pale beneath the gently rippling water. The long ends of perfectly tied shoestrings stretched toward the surface as if reaching for air as small gray fish pecked at the naked flesh of the partially waterlogged body.

"H-hello?" The word scraped against Jana's dry tongue as the wind gusted and goose bumps flashed across her arms.

The only response was the quiet *whish whish* of the pink windbreaker.

"Are you o-okay?" Jana's throat tightened as she forced herself to inch forward, forced her trembling hand to reach out, her fingers to grasp the edge of the jacket. Her heart was a chunk of ice inside her chest as she pulled back the pink collar.

Blood as red and dry as brick crusted against a gash across the woman's neck and stained the shoulder of her lemon-yellow top.

Jana jerked backward and pressed the gingham blanket to her mouth, muffling the cry that crunched like gravel in her throat.

Her hands went numb and the blanket slid from her fingers as another gust blew back the jacket's hood, revealing a round nose and chin and open, cloudy eyes she knew all too well.

“Julie!” she shrieked and took another step back.

The blanket tangled around Jana’s ankles, and she stumbled, as graceful as a newborn colt. The breath wheezed from her lungs when she smacked the ground. With a haggard breath, she sucked in a mouthful of sand. She lifted her chin and spit. Blond hair blew in front of her eyes, tangling with her own dark strands, and she brushed them back before realizing they weren’t her own.

Her screams flooded her eyes with tears as she pawed at the shore, scampering backward, the heels of her shoes digging trenches in the sand.

Minutes went by, or maybe seconds, hours, years. Time had no meaning with death so near.

Finally, Jana’s shrieks ceased, and her insides went numb. With shaking hands, she removed her phone from her fanny pack. It took three tries before she could dial 911 without error. When asked later, she wouldn’t recall what she said to the operator or that she’d sent a text for help to her son, Jax Ashley. She would only remember the stillness of Julie Stoll’s body, how pink her coat had looked against the deep red stain, and the gash across her neck that rippled and puckered like hardened candlewax.

Satan was loose in Goodeville, infecting its people, turning them all away from the Lord. This was proof. And this time everyone would see it.

Jana’s fingers flew to her crucifix necklace. Her breath cracked around a noiseless sob as she clutched the gold cross so tightly the points bit into the flesh of her palm. “*Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name . . .*”

Still cloaked to human eyes, Amphitrite stepped onto shore next to Jana in a cloud of salt-scented air, the layers of her skirt undulating in time with the gently pulsing lake waters. A smile still played at her lips, the gentle curve of a dolphin’s back, as she circled Jana Ashley.

“*This is not the fault of Satan.*”

Hex You

Sand flew as Jana jumped to her feet and whirled around. “Who’s there?”

“*It is I . . .*” Amphitrite’s grin fell as she lifted her algae-green gaze toward the heavens. “*My child.*”

Jana blinked the tears from her lashes and scanned the banks of wildflowers and gently swaying grasses, expecting at any moment for the blades to burst into flame.

“God?” She opened her mouth to say more and closed it just as quickly. She had never been one to believe that the almighty would speak to her directly. At least, not with His words.

Amphitrite’s sigh was a cloud of ocean spray. “*I have come in your time of need, my child,*” she said, adding the last bit for good measure.

A single tear rolled down Jana’s cheek. “Oh, Holy Savior, if I am truly blessed enough for it to really be you, please deliver me from this evil. Show me the way back to your light.”

Amphitrite frowned down at the mousy woman. Mortals were so simple, almost not worth the energy to wring them out for the tiny drops of fun that dribbled free. But that *witch* had to be shown her place. And didn’t they say that it took a village to raise a child? Well, Amphitrite would use one to burn Hunter Goode to the ground.

“*Goodeville has been poisoned, tainted, infected by evil.*” Amphitrite studied Jana, the mortal’s wide muddy-brown eyes twinkling with a reverence the sea goddess had gone so long without that she had almost forgotten its allure. “*Infected by witches.*”

“I knew it,” Jana whispered as she clutched her crucifix. “I’ve witnessed Hunter Goode, one of the devil’s whores, practicing Satanism.”

She had been right about that girl. Of course, Jana had known what she’d seen, but enough people had said that she had a few screws loose that she had started to agree with them. Then Kirk Whitfield had told her the Goode twins, Hunter in particular, were evil—that

they worshipped Satan—and now God Himself had chosen her to be His instrument and send that harpy back to the fiery pits of hell.

Amphitrite cocked her head and let out another sigh of sea mist as a thick tentacle slithered out from under her skirts and swept up to catch her crown before it slid from her wet hair. The Goodes' magic was ancestral, in their blood, magic that came from this realm and this line of women, not Satan. But that was one of many things these non-magical bipeds would never understand.

"A means to an end," she grumbled low enough not to be heard by Jana before clearing her throat. *"Only someone like you—a true believer—can lead the charge and protect this town and the souls of those within it."*

Jana's chin quivered and her eyes filled with another round of tears. God had led her here, to Julie, to this example of what would happen to them all if she didn't follow His direction.

"Hunter Goode must be dealt with." Amphitrite's tentacle nestled her crown of starfish and seashells back against her hair and caressed her cheek before disappearing beneath the layers of her shimmering skirts. *"Her sister, too."*

Jana patted her crucifix. "I pray for them every night, especially Hunter with her pentagrams and devil worship. Although, I suppose you being the Lord and all are already aware of my prayers." Frowning, she brushed her dark hair from her face. "What more can I do? The town—" Sirens wailed in the distance as Jana slid her crucifix back and forth along its thin gold chain. "Oh, Holy Savior, they think I'm crazy. Barbara Ritter even offered me a Xanax when she saw me in the checkout line at the IGA."

Amphitrite's grin returned as the sirens grew nearer. The real fun was about to begin. *"Do you have faith?"*

"Of course," Jana offered before even drawing a breath.

"Then leave the town to me. I shall show them the light."

Goddess or not, had Jana Ashley been able to see Amphitrite's sinister smile or heard her laugh like knives on glass, she would have

Hex You

known without a doubt that true evil smelled of the sea and had eyes the color of envy.

Gravel sprayed into the tall grasses as two bronze-and-white sheriff's cruisers fishtailed into the small parking lot and skidded to a stop fifty yards from Jana, God, and the body of Julie Stoll. The ambulance wasn't far behind, the piercing howl of its siren masking the sounds of squealing brakes, muffler coughs, and crunching gravel from the cars whose drivers had spotted the emergency vehicles and quickly changed course to follow.

There was a blur of activity as the beach was cordoned off and the EMTs raced to the shore, the crash cart digging deep tracks in the sand. Deputy Carter tucked his cowboy hat under his arm as he questioned Jana, and she answered, slowly and carefully, all the while searching the breeze for the voice of God, her mouth tasting like salt.

The small parking lot was nearly full, and a crowd had gathered at the edge of the grass, literal ambulance chasers, for there wasn't much else to do in Goodeville than gawk at the fortune, or, in this case, *misfortune* of others. Their dramatically hushed whispers of *someone's dead, another murder, and what's this town coming to?* spilled out onto the shore and swirled around Amphitrite.

The great goddess of the sea let out a wave of laughter like clanging metal as she descended upon the townsfolk. The air grew sticky with a layer of salt-tinged mist that settled like morning dew on top the grass while Amphitrite poured her wicked lies into the ears of the people of Goodeville. Most of them drank it up, thirsty for anywhere to put their fear, parched for a place to lay blame, but there were some who were not so needy, some who stood firmly and did not let the rising tide sweep them off their feet.

By the time Jax Ashley reached Goode Lake, the parking lot was full, and he had to park in the grass. He elbowed his way through the crowd, mist collecting on his skin like sweat and salt burning his eyes.

“It was the Goode girls,” one neighbor hissed as Jax pushed past on his way to his mother. “They’re what caused all of this.”

“Harlots!” said another. “The both of them.”

“Worse than that!” came a shout from the back followed by murmured agreements. “They’re *witches*.”

Jax broke through the onlookers and charged toward his mother who sat with an EMT, her checkered blanket wrapped around her shoulders. He combed his hand through the salt-tinged moisture that beaded against his dark hair.

Burn them.

The words roared against his ears with a crash of ocean waves.

ONE

The plastic beads attached to the spokes of Hunter's bike wheels were a constant applause as she raced to the park and the Gatekeeper of the Egyptian Underworld that stood at its center. She ignored the screech of tires and honk of horns as she blew through the parking lot like a rocket. Her bike creaked and rattled when she hopped the curb and furiously pedaled through the grass to the doum palm. The sun had begun its descent beneath the horizon, and the lights of the tennis courts and baseball fields bit through the twilight and drew in townspeople like moths.

Hunter wasn't worried about onlookers. They could think what they wanted. They could capture her under cover of dark and tie her to a stake in the middle of Main Street for all she cared. As long as it was *after* she rescued her sister from the Egyptian Underworld.

Hunter had felt lonely, but she could never truly be alone while Mercy was alive. No matter what they went through, they were in this life together. They had been from the very start and no unearthly dimension would change that.

Hunter hopped off her bike and let it crash to the ground as she ran the rest of the way to the clump of doum palms that had protected the town from the ancient monsters of the Egyptian Underworld for generations. Xena was a blur of black, brown, and white fur as she raced toward Hunter and the tree. The cat mewed and circled Hunter's ankles as she caught up to her. The witch didn't need to hear the Maine coon's words to know what she said.

How many times and in how many ways had Mercy asked for Hunter's help? How many times had Hunter pushed her sister away?

Hunter pressed her hands against one of the palm's fragile shoots and called to the warrior she knew stood watch on the other side of the gate. "Khenti Amenti, Gate Guardian of the Realm of Osiris, answer my call."

The fabric between realms rippled and pulsed like a still lake around the rock of Hunter's call. She took a step back and clamped her hands into fists at her side. Khenti would give her answers even if she had to drag him into Goodeville to get them.

Xena arched her back and yowled as the gate came into focus. Hunter's fists unclenched and she stumbled backward as six warriors marched toward the gate. Their muscular bodies shimmered with each deliberate step forward and their sharp-tipped spears glinted in the Underworld's light. Hunter's heart clicked against her ribs as she focused from one snarling jackal mask to the next. Their painted fangs gleamed, and their red fur blazed like fire through the veil.

"Where is Mercy Anne Goode, the Green Witch from this realm?" Hunter screamed at the Gatekeepers. "What did you do to my sister?"

The jackal warriors stood at attention. Their masks had come to life and each of their pointed ears twitched.

Xena yowled and screeched a hiss as she stalked between Hunter and the warriors. They moved as one and each tightened their grip

Hex You

on their weapon, their snarling lips parted with a low growl of their own.

“Bring me Khenti Amenti!” Hunter shouted. “I demand to speak to the protector of this gate.”

“*We are the protectors now.*” They spoke with one voice, a low rumble that buzzed through Hunter’s ears.

Hunter fisted her hands by her sides. “What did you do to my sister?”

“*We do not answer to you, young witch.*”

The fabric that separated the realms rippled once more, washing the redheaded jackal warriors from view.

Xena howled as Hunter charged the vanishing creatures.

“Mercy!” she screamed and reached for the shimmering divide, but it was too late. The warriors were gone, and the realm’s entrance was once more shielded by the doom.

Hunter wrapped her arms around the center shoot and pressed her forehead against the rough bark. “Mercy, if you can hear me, I’m sorry . . . for everything.” Tears streamed down her nose and splattered the ground. “And I’m coming for you.”

She wiped her eyes and stared through the palm to the warriors she knew lurked behind the gate. “I am a Cosmic Witch. Yes, I am young, but I have generations of power in my blood and the strength of the moon and the vastness of the universe wrapped inside my magic. I’ll tear apart your world and this one to find my sister.”

The pendant Tyr’s magic had given back to her heated against her chest and a jolt of energy crackled beneath her skin. “I am Hunter Jayne Goode, and no one fucks with my twin, except me.”

She let the message hang in the air between worlds for a moment before she bent down and scooped up the giant ball of hissing fluff. Hunter ignored the crowd, phones out and slack-jawed, that had gathered to witness the otherworldly event as she picked up her bike and set Xena in the basket next to her purse. She walked her bike to

the parking lot as she spun her crescent ring around her finger and stared up at the brightening moon.

“We’ll find Mercy,” she whispered, hopping onto her bike and stroking Xena’s hackles as she pedaled them to the Goode house to gather her arsenal. “And then we’ll bring her home.”

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

First published in the United States by Wednesday Books,
an imprint of St. Martin's Publishing Group

HEX YOU. Copyright © 2023 by P. C. Cast and Kristin Cast. All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America. For information, address
St. Martin's Publishing Group, 120 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10271.

www.wednesdaybooks.com

The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.

ISBN 978-1-250-76569-7 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-250-76570-3 (ebook)

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use.

Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and
Premium Sales Department at 1-800-221-7945, extension 5442,
or by email at MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

First Edition: 2023

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1