

HEXED

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THE SISTERS OF WITCHDOWN

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an imprint of **Prometheus Books**
Amherst, NY

Published 2015 by Pyr®, an imprint of Prometheus Books

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Cover illustration by Larry Rostant © Boom Entertainment, Inc.

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19 18 17 16 15 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Nelson, Michael Alan.

Hexed : the sisters of Witchdown / by Michael Alan Nelson.

pages cm

ISBN 978-1-63388-056-6 (paperback) — ISBN 978-1-63388-057-3 (e-book)

I. Title.

PZ7.1.N45Hex 2015

[Fic]—dc23

2014049178

Printed in the United States of America

PROLOGUE

Gina jumped when the phone rang. The cordless receiver was on her vanity, almost lost among the dozens of lotions and makeup cases scattered across its surface. She wanted to get up off the floor and answer, but she couldn't make herself move. She just pulled her knees tight to her chest and watched the phone's orange light blink with every ring.

It was David. It had to be. He would have found out by now and would be trying to call her. She wanted to talk to him more than anything, but there was no way she was going to pick up the phone. It was sitting right beneath the large mirror, and there was nothing in the world that could make Gina stand in front of a mirror.

Not after tonight.

The ringing suddenly stopped. Everything dissolved into a muffled silence, as if someone had put a pillow over the world. She couldn't even hear the soft rustle of her bedroom curtains swaying in the autumn breeze. The only thing she could hear was the sound of her own heart pounding inside her chest.

She jumped again when she felt the sudden jolt of her cell phone vibrating in her jeans pocket. She pulled it out and nearly dropped it in her hurry to answer.

"H-h-hello?"

"Gina? Gina, what the hell is going on? Olivia called and said you freaked!"

"David . . . I'm so scared." Gina's voice started to crack. She had been able to keep herself from crying ever since she left the old Worcester House, but once she heard David's voice, her resolve vanished.

"Okay, calm down, sweetie, and just tell me what happened."

Gina wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “It’s real, David. All of it. I thought it would be fun, you know, just scaring each other, but . . .”

David was quiet for a moment before he spoke. “But . . . what?”

“I saw her. It was my turn alone in the room and . . .”

“Gina, you’re imagining things. Or one of the girls was playing a trick on you.”

“It wasn’t a trick!” She didn’t like yelling at David. His ex-girlfriend had always yelled at him, and she didn’t want to be anything like her. So Gina took a deep breath and calmly said, “All the other girls were in the study with the book. I was the only one in the bedroom. She was there. I saw her. And when I saw her, I ran.”

“It could have been your own reflection.”

“No, David, I—”

“Gina, listen to me.” His voice changed. He spoke more slowly, his tone deeper and more like an adult’s. He talked like this whenever he wanted to take charge of a conversation. Even his teachers would sit quietly and listen when David used “the Voice.” It was one of the things that Gina most admired about him. But she didn’t admire it so much now that he was using it on her.

“There are no such things as ghosts. Or witches, or ghouls, or things that go bump in the night. They don’t exist. Whatever you saw wasn’t real. Either you imagined it or your brain misinterpreted something completely rational. Your mind will definitely play tricks on you if you’re scared. And the Worcester House is a scary place at night. Okay?”

Everything he said made perfect sense. The sensible part of Gina’s mind understood that. But Gina knew that it wasn’t her imagination getting the better of her. She didn’t just see the woman in the mirror. The woman in the mirror saw *her*.

“Where are you now?”

“Home. I ran straight here.”

David gave a soft chuckle before he said, “Do you want me to sneak over?”

“Yes, but you can’t. It’s too late and my dad will be home any—”

As if on cue, Gina heard the front door open. “Gina? Are you here, kiddo?” her dad called from downstairs.

“David, I have to go. Dad’s home.”

“All right, babe. But listen, there’s no need to be scared. I would never let anything hurt my girl. Promise.”

Gina couldn’t help but smile.

“I’ll see you at school,” David said. “Love you.”

“I love you, too.” Gina put her phone back in her pocket and forced herself to stand.

The door to her bedroom opened, and her father stepped in. He was an impressively large man. He had to duck his head to get under the door frame, and his massive arms were about to split the sleeves of his police uniform. When he saw Gina, he asked, “Gina? You’ve got every light on in the house. And aren’t you supposed to be staying at Carly’s tonight?”

Gina desperately tried to think of something to say but couldn’t. Instead, she ran forward and threw her arms around him.

“Hey, hey . . . what’s going on?” He looked down at her and lifted her chin. “You’ve been crying. Did something happen?”

If she told him that she and her friends had sneaked into the abandoned Worcester House, she’d be grounded for life. But Gina knew he wouldn’t stop hounding her until he knew what was bothering her so badly. The cop in him could never let anything go unsolved.

“We . . . we were watching horror movies, and I . . . I got scared and came home.” She wasn’t lying about being scared, only the reason for it. But her dad could always tell when she was lying just by looking into her eyes, so she buried her face in his chest and squeezed harder.

Her dad patted her back. “Aren’t you a little old to be getting that scared from movies?”

“I just wanted to come home where it’s safe.” Her dad may have been a cop and bigger than anyone she knew, but she felt safer around David. David had a way of making Gina feel safe without making her feel like a scared kid. But right now, she was happy to just have someone home.

“Gina . . .”

Gina looked up, expecting to see her dad smiling down at her. Instead, he was looking off in the corner. His brows were furrowed, and his mouth pinched to one side of his face. “Is there someone else in the room with you?”

Gina went cold. Her dad gently moved her behind him with one hand while putting his other hand on his gun. “Gina, if you have a boy in here, you best tell me now.”

“N-n-no . . . there’s no one. Why, what did you see? Dad, what did you see?”

Her dad moved across the room toward her closet in the corner. “I thought I saw . . . something. Just stay there.” He opened the closet door with a sudden pull that made Gina take a step back. But there were only clothes inside.

“Hmmm . . . I could have sworn I saw something.”

Gina could feel the cold grip of fear squeezing her again. But her dad was here. And he was a cop. A large one, at that. So she was safe. But if she truly believed that, why was she still so scared?

Movement caught the corner of her eye. She turned involuntarily and found herself staring straight at her vanity mirror. She could see her own reflection, the tangle of her frazzled hair, the tear-smudged eyeliner down her cheeks. For a moment, Gina was appalled at her appearance. But her disgust turned to horror when she saw the other figure reflected in the mirror.

It was the woman.

Gina wanted to scream, to run, but she couldn’t move. The woman in the mirror held her gaze with wild, unblinking eyes.

Through her terror, Gina tried to make sense of what was happening. From the reflection, the woman should have been standing right in front of her, but there was no one there. The woman existed only in the mirror.

She was impossibly thin and so pale that Gina could see tiny black veins spidering underneath her skin. The woman's hair was gray and gnarled like a dirty mop left to dry in the sun, and her tattered dress looked even more ancient than she did. But the most unsettling thing of all was her smile. She had a mouth filled with bone-white needles.

Gina could see her dad still nosing around her closet out of the corner of her eye. She tried calling out to him but could only manage a tiny squeak. The woman grew larger in the reflection, as if she were stepping closer to the mirror.

“. . . Dad?”

“Sorry, kiddo,” he said from the closet. “I guess I forget to leave my police instincts back at the office. I didn't mean to scare you.”

Her dad popped his head out of the closet. “It's okay, you can relax. There's no one here.” He took a step toward her but stopped. From where he was standing, he couldn't see into the mirror, but the look on her face must have frozen him in his tracks. “Gina, honey, what's wrong?” Just at the edge of her vision, she could see her dad moving toward her. But even though he was only a few feet away, somehow she knew he wouldn't make it in time.

Gina tried to look away from the woman, but she still couldn't pull her gaze from her terrible eyes. Something deep inside her warned her to run, to get away as fast as she could. If she didn't get away right now, she knew that she never would.

Gina gritted her teeth. Then, with everything she had, she pivoted on the balls of her feet and dove straight toward her dad.

That's when the woman reached out of the mirror and grabbed her.

CHAPTER 1

Lucifer knew she was being followed. She started to walk across the street then stopped halfway and pretended to tie her shoe. A green minivan came to a screeching halt just in front of her, sending plumes of gray smoke rolling past. Lucifer crinkled her nose at the smell of burning rubber and stood up. She gave the woman driving the minivan an apologetic smile before crossing to the sidewalk.

Everyone on the sidewalk was watching her now. And that was the point. If someone was following her, they wouldn't want to risk being discovered by making eye contact with her. So Lucifer was looking for the person who *wasn't* watching her. But of all the faces staring at her, only two weren't paying her any attention: a cop writing a parking ticket down the street and a window washer cleaning the seventh floor of an office building half a block away.

She moved off the street, and everyone went back about their own business. If someone was following her, there was nothing she could do about it now. Besides, she had more important matters to deal with.

Lucifer opened a heavy metal door at the front of a bland brick building and stepped through. Inside, the walls of the small waiting room were a drab shade of blue. A few plastic chairs sat in front of a faded coffee table littered with old magazines. A man with a patchy beard who sat on one of the chairs pulled his nose out from a tattered copy of *National Geographic* to look at her. The way his eyes scanned her from head to toe annoyed her, but Lucifer ignored him and stepped up to the counter on the far side of the room.

The young woman behind the counter was giving Lucifer a curious stare. Her face was round, and she had a small dot on the side

of her nose where, Lucifer suspected, a nose ring would be if she were allowed to wear one here. The woman brushed a lock of purple hair from her eyes and said, "Can I help you?"

"Yeah, I have a question."

The woman frowned. "Unless you have a referral, the doctor can't see you. And if you're not eighteen, you have to be accompanied by a parent or guardian." She leaned over the counter and arched an eyebrow. "Do you have ID?"

Lucifer shook her head. "No, I don't."

"Then I can't help you, sorry."

"Can't or won't? I just want to ask a question."

The woman with the purple hair gave a heavy sigh and crossed her arms. "What's your question?"

"Can you remove tattoos?"

The woman stood back and tilted her head. "Oh. You have a tattoo? Well, that's something we can do, but like I said, you need a referral and a parent or guardian."

"Are you sure? I need it removed *now*. I can pay. Cash. I just need to get rid of it." Lucifer realized she was gripping the edge of the counter and let go. "Please, isn't there some way?"

The woman's expression softened. "I'm really sorry. But we could get in a lot of trouble. Even places like this have to follow some rules. And if you're under eighteen, this is one of those rules. I'm really sorry."

"Can you do it?" Lucifer asked.

The woman shook her head. "I'm not a doctor. I'm only eighteen. This is my dad's clinic, so I help him out when I can. I've just started studying to be an emergency medical technician. So, I can help you with a sprained ankle, but no can do on the tattoo." The woman gave Lucifer a genuine frown of sympathy. "What kind of ink do you have?"

Lucifer gave the man in the plastic chair a quick glance. The

woman looked at him then turned toward Lucifer. “Why don’t you come in the back. We’ve got a private booth we can use.”

Lucifer nodded and followed the woman toward the back. She was happy to have a little privacy, though it wasn’t out of modesty. The fewer people that knew about her mark, the safer she would be.

The woman ushered her inside a small, well-lit room about the size of a walk-in closet. She closed the door and motioned toward a red leather table pressed against the wall. “Have a seat. What’s your name?”

“Lucifer.”

The woman sat down on a rolling stool and folded her arms. “That’s an . . . interesting name.”

“That’s what everyone tells me.”

“Did your parents not like you or something?”

I never knew my parents. “Luci Jenifer Inacio Das Neves. Lucifer for short.”

The woman extended her hand and said, “I’m Trish. Nice to meet you.” Lucifer took her hand and gave it a quick shake. “So,” Trish said. “You want to show me this tattoo?”

Lucifer unzipped her black hoodie and tossed it on the table next to her. She grabbed the strap of her light tank top and pulled it down to reveal her right shoulder blade. Lucifer couldn’t see the mark, but she didn’t have to. She knew exactly what it looked like. The mark was a solid black symbol, roughly seven inches tall. It was shaped like a Gothic lowercase letter “h” that covered most of her shoulder blade. The sensation of its presence was subtle, barely perceptible, but Lucifer could always feel it. It felt like some stunted, malformed wing that withered and died before it was fully grown.

Trish traced the mark with her finger. “You’re not eighteen, are you? Because whoever did this could lose their license for giving a minor a tattoo.”

“Can you get rid of it?”

“Like I said, without a parent we can’t . . .” Trish stopped talking. After a few seconds, she said, “Seriously, Lucifer. Who gave this to you? I’ve never seen ink like this before.” Lucifer could feel Trish’s breath on her skin as she leaned in for a closer inspection. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say this was a birthmark.”

It wasn’t the first time she had heard that. She had gone to a tattoo parlor earlier that week hoping they might be able to remove it. The artist she showed it to had the same reaction as Trish. He had even tried to stop her from leaving unless she told him who gave it to her. Of course, that’s when Lucifer taught him that a guy with that much metal dangling from his face should think twice before bullying someone.

“Most people go with Eastern symbols of some kind. Why’d you choose an ‘h’?”

Lucifer remained silent. *I didn’t choose it. It was a gift, but not a gift for me.*

“I’ll be honest, I don’t know if we *can* remove that. That’s like no tattoo I’ve ever seen before. If you wanted to get rid of it, you’d need a skin graft.”

Lucifer pulled her shoulder strap back up and slipped her hoodie back on. “So, then you can’t get rid of it. Well, I thought I should at least ask. Sorry to waste your time.”

“I can recommend a hospital that might be able to help. A second opinion never hurt.”

Lucifer knew that if she went to a hospital, being under eighteen with no guardian would be the least of her problems. There would be too many questions she’d have to answer. “Thanks, but that’s okay. I guess I’ll just have to get used to it.”

“Hey, we’ve all been there. I got a tattoo on my eighteenth birthday and ended up covering it up three months later. I tell you what . . .” Trish reached into the back pocket of her black jeans and pulled out a business card. “When you do turn eighteen, let me know

and I can take you to my tattoo guy. He's really good, and I can convince him to give you a discount. He can cover it with something you like."

Lucifer took the card. It was a sweet gesture, but just covering the mark wouldn't change anything. She'd still be hexed. The only way she'd ever truly be free would be to have it completely removed. Sadly, there didn't appear to be any way to remove it unless she flayed the skin from her shoulder. But Lucifer knew deep down even that wouldn't work. There was only one person in the world who could take it away, and she never would. It was *her* gift, after all.

Lucifer stepped out of the small room then turned back to Trish. "Do you have a back door?"

Trish frowned and gave her a questioning scowl. "Yeah . . . Lucifer, are you in trouble? Should I call the police?"

Lucifer stared at the heavy front door for a moment. Even though she wasn't able to see him, she knew someone was out there, waiting for her. "No. I'm fine. It's just . . . an ex-boyfriend. He can't seem to let go, you know?"

Trish gave her a knowing smile. "Oh, I know. C'mon. Follow me."

It was a lie. The idea of having a boyfriend was as foreign to Lucifer as having a horn sprouting from her forehead. But even though she knew Trish was just trying to help, Lucifer knew that "help" meant calling the cops. And the last thing Lucifer needed was a chat with the police.

Trish led her through the back of the parlor and past a small break room to another heavy door. She twisted the dead bolt and opened it. "Here you go. Take care."

"Thanks." Lucifer gave her a small smile, pulled her hood over her head, and disappeared into the alley.