

Divine by Mistake

P. C. Cast

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Extract

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P.C. CAST



Book One of the
GODDESS OF PARTHOLON
series





Finally, on my way. My Mustang felt sweet as it zipped down the nearly empty highway. Why is it that cars seem to drive best when they're freshly washed? Leaning down, I popped a CD into the player, skipped forward to track 6 and began singing at the top of my very tone-deaf lungs with Eponine about the futility of love. As the next song keyed up, I swung around a slow-moving Chevy and yelled, "God, I love being a teacher!"

It was the first day of June, and the summer stretched before me, pristine and virginal.

"All those days of sleeping in to go!"

Just saying it aloud made me happy. In my ten years of teaching I've noticed that teachers tend to have a bad habit of talking to themselves. I hypothesize that this is because we talk for a living, and we feel safe speaking our feelings aloud. Or it could be that most of us, especially the high school teacher variety, are just weird as shit.

Only the slightly insane would choose a career teaching teenagers. I can just see my best girlfriend Suzanna's face screw up and the involuntary shudder move down her spine as I relate the latest trials and tribulations of the high school English classroom.

"God, Sha, they're so...so...*hormone filled*. Eew!"

Suzanna is a typical college professor snob, but I love her anyway. She just doesn't appreciate the many and varied opportunities for humorous interludes that teenagers provide on a daily basis.

Jean Valjean's dynamic tenor interrupted my musings, bringing me back to Oklahoma I-44 East and June 1.

"Yep, this is it—the life of a high school English teacher with a sense of humor. Doomed to having no money but plenty of comedic fodder. Oh, crap, there's my exit!"

Luckily my little Mustang could take the hard, fast right onto US-412. The sign said Locust Grove 22 miles. I drove half with my knee and half with my hand while I fumbled to unfold the auction flyer that held my written directions. Somewhere about midway between Locust Grove (what an awful name for a town) and Siloam Springs there should be a big sign that pointed to a side road till another sign, another side road, and so forth, until I came to the Unique Estate Auction—Unusual Items—All Offers Considered—All Must Go.

"Well, I certainly like weird old stuff. And I really like weird old cheap stuff."

My students say my classroom is like a bizarre time warp. My walls and cabinets are filled with everything from prints by Waterhouse to posters of Mighty Mouse and hanging *Star Trek Enterprise* models, along with an almost scary number of wind chimes (they're good chi).

And that's just my classroom. They should see my condo. Guess they really wouldn't be surprised. Except at home I'm a neat freak. My classroom is always in a perpetual state of disarray. I can't seem to find anything if everything is found. Whatever the hell that means.

"I've got to stop cussing!" Saying it out loud would, hopefully, reinforce the idea. Kind of a twist on the Pavlov's dog theory. I keep saying it; it will begin to happen.

“I can’t take you today, Javert.” Flick! Off went *Les Misérables*. On goes the jazz station out of Tulsa. It’s cool that I could pick it up way out in the boonies.

The sign read Locust Grove City Limits. So I slowed down, blinked, and the town was gone. Well, maybe it was nominally bigger than a blink. And I stayed slowed down. Time to stop and smell the green of Green Country. Oklahoma in early summer is an amazing display of color and texture. I went to college at the University of Illinois, and it always annoyed me that people talked about Oklahoma like it was a red dust bowl. Or some black-and-white scene of misery from *The Grapes of Wrath*. When I tried to tell the college gang that Oklahoma was really known as “Green Country” they would scoff and look at me as if they thought I’d eaten too many tumbleweeds or punched too many cows.

I passed through the tiny town of Leach (another unfortunate name) and topped a rise in the road. Oklahoma stretched before me, suddenly looking untamed in its beauty. I like to imagine a time when these roads were just paths, and civilization hadn’t been so sure of itself. It must have been exciting to be alive then—not exciting like facing the principal after he has just heard from a parent who is upset about me calling Guinevere a slut—but exciting in a rugged, perhaps-we-won’t-bathe-or-brush-our-teeth and we-kill-our-own-food-and-tote-our-own-water kind of way. Ugh. On second thought. . . . It’s delicious to dream about the days of cowboys or knights or dragons, and I will admit to an obsession with poets of the Romantic era and literature set, well, way back when (technical English teacher term). But reality reminds me that in actuality they did without penicillin and Crest. As my kids would say, “What’s up with that?”

“There it is! Turnoff number one, as in a road sign, not to be confused with the blind date who comes to your door in navy blue double-knit trousers and a receding hairline.”

UNIQUE ESTATE AUCTION AHEAD and an arrow, which pointed down a side road to my left.

This road was much less traveled (poetic pun intended). Kind of a sorry little two-laner with potholes and deep gravel shoulders. But it twisted and rolled in a pretty way, and “To Grandmother’s house we go” hummed through my mind. I tried in vain to remember the rest of the song for the next several miles.

UNIQUE ESTATE AUCTION AHEAD and another arrow. Another side-side road. This one more gravel, less two lane, than the other. Well, maybe the out-of-the-wayness of the estate would serve to dissuade the antique dealers, whom I considered the bane of every broke auction-goer. The jazz station faded out, which was actually fine because the Grandmother’s House song had also faded from my internal radio—and been replaced with the theme to *The Beverly Hillbillies* (these words I did remember all of, which I found vaguely disturbing).

Speaking of hillbillies, I hadn’t seen many houses. Hmm...maybe the “estate” was really an old ranch house, smack in the middle of what used to be a real ranch owned by some Bonanzaesque rich folks. Now they’ve all died off and the land would be subdivided into neat little housing divisions so upper-middle-class folks could commute to...well, wherever. I call that job security for me. Upper-middle-class folks always have the prerequisite 2.5 kids, plus an additional 1.5 kid (from a previous marriage). And those kids gotta pass English to graduate from high school. God bless America.

Over a crook and a rise in the “road” loomed what I had been imagining as an old ranch house. “Holy shit! It’s the House of Usher!” (Summer was definitely not the time to work on the cussing thing.) I slowed. Yep—there was another sign: UNIQUE ESTATE AUCTION, planted next to the

gravel trail leading to the estate. A few cars, but mostly trucks (it *is* Oklahoma) were parked on what at one time was obviously a beautifully maintained front...I don't know...what the hell do you call something like that...it stretched on and on...yard seemed too simple a word. Grounds. That sounded better. Lots of grass. The drive was lined with *big* trees, as in *Gone with the Wind*, minus the weeping moss.

I realized I was gawking because an old guy dressed in black slacks and a high-necked white cotton shirt was waving me in with one of those handheld orange flashlight things, and his face had an irritated "stop gawking and drive, lady" look on it. As I pulled up next to him, he motioned for me to roll my window down.

"Afternoon, miss." He bent slightly at the waist and peered into my window. A fetid rush of air brought his words into my air-conditioned interior and killed my initial joy at being called "miss," which is definitely younger sounding than "ma'am." He was taller than I first thought, and his face was heavily lined, as if he had worked outside in the elements most of his life, but his complexion was a sickly, sallow color.

Good God! It was the daddy from *Children of the Corn*.

"Afternoon. Sure is warm today." I tried to be pleasant.

"Yes, miss." Ugh—that *smell* again. "Please pull forward onto The Green. The auction will begin promptly at two."

"Uh, thanks." I tried to smile as I rolled the window up and moved to follow his pointed directions. What was that smell? Like something dead. Well, he was awfully pale; perhaps he wasn't well. That would account for the smell and the fact that he was wearing long sleeves in June, and I was a seriously hateful bitch to call the poor old guy *Children of the Corn's* daddy. And the front yard is called The Green. Learn something new every day! I said to myself with a grimace. Clichés are the bane of educated mankind.

Before I turned off the car, I took my required several minutes (a man once told me he could always tell how attractive a woman was by how long it took her to get out of a car—I try to take a longgg time) to reapply my lipstick. I also took a minute to scope out the house. Scratch that—mansion.

My first impression held. This place seriously conjured images of Poe and Hawthorne. It was humongous, in a sprawling, Victorian-type of way. I'm usually drawn to unusual old homes, but not so with this one. I tipped my sunglasses down my nose to get a better view. It looked odd. It took a moment to figure out why, then it hit me—it looked as if it had been built in several different parts. The basic building was roughly a huge square, but added on to this square were two different porches, one rectangular with steps leading up to the entrance in a grandiose, sweeping manner. Not twenty feet down from the first porch was a second, rounded gazebo-like structure just, well, stuck on to the front of the building, complete with latticework and gnarly-looking roses. A large turret room was attached to one side of the building, like a cancerous growth, and a slope-roofed wing emerged from the opposite end of the structure. The whole thing was painted an awful shade of gray, and it was cracked and crinkled, like an old smoker's skin.

"There should really be some *unique* items to be had here." Muttering to myself, I got ready to tear my eyes away from Usher's abode when a shiver tickled down my spine. A thick cloud passed in front of the sun and the "walking on my grave" feeling hit me like a bad dream. *Is it late? It seems to me that the light darkens.* My English teacher mind plucked the quote from *Medea*. Greek tragedy, replete with revenge, betrayal and death. Seemed, in an inopportune way, appropriate.

New York Times *bestselling author*

P.C. CAST

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