



TIN MONKEYS



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Author's Note

Though *Tin Monkeys* is a work of fiction, all historical events described herein are based on actual events and often are described exactly how they reportedly occurred.

In addition, all technology discussed—no matter how surreal—has been proven theoretically possible, if not already a reality.

And finally, all psychological and physiological phenomena discussed in this book are based on proven scientific research and accepted theories.

If you find yourself experiencing any symptoms similar to those described within these pages, please seek the aid of a medical professional immediately.

Sometimes truth is stranger than fiction.

Enjoy

Chapter 1



The woman at the end of the bar is giving me fuck-me eyes. I'm a little surprised considering the state I'm in. But it's just a glance here and there—she's too timid for prolonged eye contact. Still, I know what she wants. I, however, am far from timid. My stare is that of a man eyeing a cut of filet mignon. Even tonight of all nights, I can't help but fantasize about plunging face first between those enormous breasts. And she's alone; has been for the better part of an hour. Already three appetini's in. One more and she'll fall off that bar stool. I'm alone too, for that matter, and though she's no runway model, any other day of the week I'd have her up to my apartment and out of that black silk dress faster than you could say prophylactic.

But not tonight. Tonight I have some serious drinking to do. Tonight I need to get myself good and numb. I need to push down every ounce of humanity I have left; just drown the fuckers in a lake of scotch. It's the only way I'll be able to do what has to be done. It's the only way I'll be able to pull the trigger and put a good woman to rest. It's the only way I'll be able to kill my partner.

It's not like I haven't killed anyone before. Seven human beings are no longer on this Earth because they met me. Four I put in the ground during my military career—three all in the same firefight. Two I shot

during my tenure with the FBI, and the seventh, well, the seventh I don't talk about.

All of those people were rotten, they were evil, they didn't deserve to breathe the same air as the rest of us. But my new partner, Anne Goodwin, she's, well, she's a good person. She doesn't deserve any of this, least of all to die. But what choice do I have? I tell myself it's a mercy killing. *If I don't do it, they'll haunt us both until we blow our own brains out. This is mercy I'm giving her!*

"Brian, another," I say to the bartender. He's the closest thing I have to friend anymore. He pours me another glass of Macallan Single Malt. I'm drinking the good stuff tonight. And why shouldn't I? It helps. It really helps. A few more glasses and I won't even hesitate. A few more glasses and I'll wake up tomorrow free from all of this; free from her, free to forget all about the Mad Doctor, free from the demons in my head.

"Tying one on tonight, Bill?" Brian asks. "Rough day at the office?"

"You could say that." *But my rough day is just getting started.*

A woman's voice at my back; "Bill Singer?" A familiar voice, high and reedy like a child's. Most likely she was molested at a young age. I don't turn to face her though. I need time to remember her name, to remember how we left it. Luckily, recall has never been a problem for me, even after eight glasses of scotch.

"Sarah, how are you?"

"Good. Great. I'm just fucking great, Bill." She sits down in the empty barstool next to me, grabs up my glass of scotch, and guzzles it down like its cheap well whiskey. "Oh wait. No, no I'm not great. Actually, Bill, I'm pretty shitty. Actually, Bill, I have the clap. Thanks for that, asshole."

Don't mention it. "The gift that keeps on giving," I say. "Brian, one more scotch, please. Better make it two."

Eyes ever forward. I don't look at her but I can see her wobbly double image in the mirror behind the bar. It's hard to look at yourself in the mirror when you're a piece of shit and you know it. It's even harder

when one of the people you stepped on is sitting beside you poised to stab you in the neck with a cocktail straw.

“So you admit it? You knew?”

Why would I even bother answering her? No I didn't know. Some Georgetown freshman gave it to me the night before I met her. I didn't start pissing razors until two days later. Actually, up until now I figured Sarah had given it to me. But who cares? STDs are an occupational hazard for people like Sarah and I. She'll figure that out soon enough if she keeps spreading her legs for men she just met at a bar and forgoes a rubber because, as she put it, I have honest eyes. *Honest eyes won't spare you a trip to the doctor, sweetheart.*

Brian places two glasses of scotch down on the bar, one in front of each of us. As she reaches for hers, I snatch it away and gobble it down, then take a firm hold on the single remaining glass. “Something I can do for you?” Another swallow, eyes ever forward. It's not that I'm scared to look at her, more that I simply don't care enough to turn my head.

“Something you can...? Fuck you, you piece of shit! You told me you'd call. You told me we had something special. That when you got back from wherever the fuck they were sending you, you wanted to take me somewhere tropical.”

I really don't have time for this bullshit. I have to get ready, mentally ready, and Sarah the “slap me, daddy,” one and done hairdresser from three weeks ago is not helping one bit with the mental gymnastics I'm trying to perform here.

“Somewhere trop—I was drunk, Sarah. You were drunk. We fucked. It was magical. I'll never forget our night together. Now let's just move on, okay?” *God, my shoulder is killing me.*

“Magical? Oh was it magical? I could barely walk the next day!”

“Sounds like a job well done to me.” Another sip of scotch. With each swallow I grow more and more tired of her whinny, baby voice. It's like an ice pick in my ear. How on Earth I ever found it sexy, even for an instant, is beyond comprehension.

“You think because, what, because you’re some big-shot FBI man, because you did all that hero shit, that the rest of us are just your urinal to piss on? You think just because you saved a few lives that you can shit all over the rest of us? Well I got news for you, motherfucker.” I wait for it. I wait and wait and wait but the news she promised never comes. Eventually I turn to her and stare her straight in the face. She looks ready to explode. She has the mien of three-year-old about to launch into an uncontrollable temper tantrum.

“You can’t!” is her final edict. Then she reaches for my scotch to most assuredly dump it over my head, but I deftly slide the glass aside safely out of the toddler’s reach. Frustrated and defeated, instead she picks up a dry bar napkin and tries to toss it in my face. It makes lazy snowflake arcs down to the floor.

Sarah huffs and turns to leave, but not before saying, “And you look like shit. Get some help, asshole. You’re two shades away from a corpse.”

The woman at the end of the bar in the silk dress is no longer too timid to hold eye contact with me. Only now she wears a mask of disgust.

It’s alright, beautiful. I disgust me too.

One more gulp of scotch and I feel ready to do something truly disgusting. I feel ready to kill my partner.

Chapter 2



Unless it's a serial that crosses state lines or we got a terror cell on our hands, we don't typically get called in on homicides. Sure, on occasion they'll make an exception. Like when the whole scene is just too bat-shit bizarre for local law enforcement to make any sense of it. Then they bring us in. Then they send for *The G-Men*. Only, I can't call us that anymore. Charles is dead and in the ground and my new partner, Special Agent Anne Goodwin, lacks the necessary parts to be a *G-Man*.

I wonder what Charles would've thought of this case? Bizarre as it is, it lacks that macabre vibe he was always so fond of. As if we didn't see enough sick shit throughout the work week; his idea of relaxation was a six-pack of Heineken and a European slasher flick. According to Charles, the socialists across the pond made the really good stuff. They didn't pull any punches. Nothing was taboo, especially for the Germans. Why am I not surprised?

Each week he'd try and bombard me with gruesome mental images—scenes from some godawful horror flick he'd watched over the weekend. The last one, something about centipedes and rim jobs, was his new favorite. Who the hell knows? I always tuned him out when he went all dark on me. Sick shit aside though; I miss that son of a bitch.

But no more Charles. No more questions like, “Do you think it would kill a man if you drove both your thumbs into his eye sockets?” No more brilliant anecdotes like, “Did you know if you mix fifty parts bleach and one part acetone, you get chloroform? Would make picking up those college girls you love so much, that much easier. Of course without any ether it’ll decompose to phosgene in the liver, which is pretty much guaranteed to give you cancer.”

No more chasing tail at the sports bar on 35th. No more bailouts when one too many *adult sodas* sends me into a fit of rage towards the dart-playing frat boy who just spilt his beer on my shirt and is two seconds away from losing those perfectly straight, perfectly white front teeth.

No, not anymore.

Now it’s Agent Goodwin. Now it’s Miss Palates and TechCrunch and rainbows and bubblegum farts. Now it’s three hours on a plane listening to her prattle on about how excited she is to be working with the famous—*or am I infamous?*—Special Agent Bill Singer. And six more hours in a stuffy Suburban on our way to the armpit of America to try and make sense of a seemingly impossible murder / suicide / who-the-fuck-knows-soon-to-be-cold-case. If I have to look into those puppy dog eyes one more time and hear another of her vapid apologies about the loss of my partner, I’m going to...

Where the fuck did we lose him, Goodwin? Can you find him for me! He’s not lost, he’s dead! Dead with a round lodged in his skull just above his right eye. Dead without an exit wound, just a .22 caliber bullet that made puree of his brains.

It’s one of the cleanest ways to kill someone. You place a .22 to the temple and pull the trigger. The round goes in but lacks the velocity to punch back out through the skull. Instead it just ricochets around until their brains turn to soup. No exit wound, no blood splatter analysis, no mess on your overalls. Charles told me this our first week on the job. And I bet right about now he’s pissing in his grave.

“What, no mess? No .50 cal. head explosion? No chainsaw to the back of the neck bloodbath? Just a clean and simple small arms head wound?”

I take a drag off my cigarette and another pull from my flask. I'd filled it on the plane just before we landed. But first I had the flight attendant bring me a double whiskey and coke, hold the coke. Then I had her bring me another. Then four more just to make sure my liver got the point. Then she cut me off. That's usually about the time Charles would jump in and make up some brilliant line of bullshit to keep the party going. But Agent Goodwin is no Charles. Still, by the time we landed in Branson I was properly sedated and ready to endure six more hours of my new partner explaining to me how pivotal Doctor Theodore Grant's research into quantum mechanics and particle physics had been, and how much she had loved watching his weekly television show, *Unlocking the Secrets of the Universe*, and how she'd read all his books, and how respected he was in the scientific community for his Nostradamus-like ability to predict the future of technology. Hell, he even had a Noble Prize. Of course this was all years before he, well, before he vanished off the face of the Earth.

For Christ's sake, Charles used to relax by downing a six-pack in front of the idiot-box watching psychos in ski-masks chop teen skinny-dippers to tiny bits with hatchets. Anne Goodwin relaxes with a glass of pinot and her never less than a month old, top-of-the-line tablet, reading e-books on the physical principles of quantum theory, or the advancement of artificial intelligence, or some horse shit about the existence of Big Foot and space aliens.

Doctor Theodore Grant... She's telling me all this because somewhere deep in the remoteness of the Ozarks is a cabin with an electric, booby-trapped front-door and a pile of ash and bone on the floor that's presumably Dr. Theodore Grant's mortal remains. We won't know for certain if it's Doctor Grant until forensics come back in a few days, but Agent Goodwin is convinced it's him. After all, his wallet was found at the scene along with several dozen framed pictures of him and his late wife, not to mention according to the initial police report the interior is a sci-fi junkie's wet dream. I guess I'll acquiesce to the fact there's a damn good chance the *Mad Doctor* had at least paid the place a visit recently.

My head's pounding. It always aches, especially first thing in the morning and late in the day after my midday topper has begun to wear off. And just five minutes in the passenger seat with the prattling Agent

Goodwin at the helm, I have to take another pull from my flask. I poured ten airplane bottles worth of Kentucky whiskey into it before getting off the plane. They weren't hard to palm off the drink cart. Not much of a whiskey drinker, but I figure, when in Rome.

"Are we in Kentucky yet?" I ask.

Agent Goodwin glances down at the flask. I've never felt so much condescension in my entire life. Even my ex-wife never looked at me like that. "We're heading to Arkansas, not Kentucky, Bill. Just across the border. It's all in the file I gave you on the plane."

I never opened it. Kentucky, Arkansas, Missouri, what's the difference? Another pull from my flask. Another look from Goodwin.

"You ah, you sure you should be—"

Don't finish that fucking sentence, little girl! All it takes is a look; just one look to shut her up. Then I take a third pull. Not that I was ready for another drink, mind you, but just to spite her. An over exaggerated swallow, and then I tuck the flask back into my coat pocket, safe and out of sight. A few breath mints mixed with the innocuous Dilaudid and I'm ready for hours three through six of our little adventure.

My cigarette's toast, so I toss it and light another. Eventually the silence grows too loud for Agent Goodwin to stand. She says, "Are there any bad habits you don't have?"

I don't answer her right away. I'm lost in thought, thoughts of Charles. Twenty years working alongside the greatest man I'd ever known; my brother, my coach, my father, my friend. He was all those things to me and more. I guess I'd been thinking on it a bit too long, because when finally I throw an answer Goodwin's way, she turns a look as if she has no idea what the hell I'm talking about.

"Porn," I say.

"Excuse me?"

"Porn."

"What about it?"

A lungful of sweet Virginia smoke plumes from my mouth. “You asked if there were any bad habits I don’t have. I don’t watch porn.”

Agent Goodwin looks dumbfounded. She’s lost for words. *Is it that hard to believe?* Sure I chase tail like a sixteen-year-old high school quarterback. Damn near found myself on the wrong side of a sexual harassment lawsuit my first year with the Bureau. But the old adage that all men watch porn is as much a stereotype as all Asians can’t drive for shit. Maybe that’s a bad example. Never met an Asian who could drive for shit.

“Okay, I’ll bite. Why don’t you watch porn?”

The cherry at the tip of my cigarette lights up the interior of the car as I take another pull. We’ve been winding our way through the state forest for hours on a chipseal road in perfect darkness. There’s absolutely nothing out here but trees and stars. Out of pure boredom I decide to indulge her.

“Women have it easy. When it comes to sex, all you have to do is spread your legs and lay there. Can’t get wet? No big deal. Just a few drops of KY and you’re good to go. Men, well, if our rocket ain’t gassed up when it comes time for fireworks, then you’re in for one disappointing show.”

Another confused look from Goodwin, so I change direction. “Listen, you start off looking at pictures of beautiful women. Harmless, right? Wrong. Sure, when you were young that’s all it took to get your, you know, stuff working. Shit, the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue was enough to send me to my room for an hour with some tissue and a bottle of hand lotion. Soon though, it isn’t enough. Soon you move on to watching two people fuck. Nothing crazy, just some good old-fashioned coitus.” I pound my fists together for emphasis. “But eventually you can’t even watch an entire scene through to the end because you know you can just fast forward to something new or flip the channel or click the next link and there’ll be a dozen new women waiting for you. Asian, Indian, black, white, brown, young, old, whatever you want in that fleeting moment is there at your fingertips. A few months later and plain old sex, even with every woman of the United Nations, just ain’t cuttin’ it anymore. Your brain is bombarded by images; so many different

women, different settings, different money shots, people doing different crazy shit; voyeurs and babysitters, chick's dressed up like panda bears, fucking cartoon sex. How can regular sex back in reality compete with all that?

“Instant gratification, Goodwin. One minute you're watching lesbians, then lesbians evolve into three-ways, which evolve into orgies, then gang-bangs, then gang-bangs with a bit of that sick S&M shit. Before you know it, people are pissing all over each other and it's getting you off.”

“Jesus Christ, Bill! Alright, I get it!”

Another drag of my cigarette. “You asked.”

She simmers and asks, “You know from experience?”

“You don't have to shoot heroin to know it's bad for you.”

Silence. A decade of silence. “Sorry. Didn't mean to shock you.” *Yes I did.* “I'm used to working with a partner that has a, you know, a set of balls between his legs. Shit, I mean...you know what I mean.”

Agent Goodwin gives a sly chuckle. “Grew up with three older step-brothers. You can try all you want, but you're not gonna shock me.”

Challenge accepted.

It's quiet in the Suburban for a good while. Outside, nothing but a wall of black. If Goodwin killed the lights right now it would be as if our eyes were shut. Eventually she says, “God, I haven't been somewhere this remote since I was a kid.”

She seems to expect me to acknowledge her vapid comment, but of course I fail to indulge her. So she goes on. “My family took a trip to DC once when I was little. My mom wanted to visit the US capital, do the tours, stand beneath Lincoln's giant foot and see what all the hubbub was about. My dad, though, he couldn't stand cities—couldn't stand people really. He insisted we spend half the vacation out in nature. Drove us all the way up to Catocin Mountain Park. Ever been there?”

Shit. Were you talking? “Huh? Uh, no.”

“It’s a lot like this. We drove in at night. Couldn’t even see the side of the road. I didn’t know if we were driving through a forest, or open plains, or had entered a tunnel. If it wasn’t for the stars above... I can still remember those stars.” She leans forward to peer up at the cloudless sky. “I’ve never seen them shine so bright. Never seen so many. I mean, look at ‘em.”

I don’t look. I don’t even turn my head. I’m fixated on the emptiness out my window. It’s comforting.

“The mosquitoes, though. Man they were bad. Dad had some tricks though. The repellent you buy in the cans doesn’t work a lick. The trick is dryer sheets, believe it or not.” Abruptly she stops rambling. She’s realized I’m not paying her a lick of attention.

We drive on a few more miles with quiet, and then Goodwin clears her throat and asks, “So, are you seeing anyone?”

God, I hate fucking small talk. I stare at the side of her head. She must feel my eyes on her because she gives me a double take and then blurts out, “Christ, I wasn’t hitting on you, Bill. We’ve got three more hours to drive. What the hell do you want to talk about?”

Not this. “I’m not seeing anyone.”

“Just dating then?”

“If you want to call it that.”

“Online, or—”

“Frankie’s Sports Bar on 35th. Know the place?”

She eyes me, then the road, then back to me. “Crowd’s a little young, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, well, I like to feel young. Besides, you show a twenty-something girl a badge with the initials FBI on it, they’ll practically beg you to fuck ‘em.” *Shocked yet?*

Agent Goodwin clears her throat, tightens her grip on the steering wheel then asks in a tone as if she completely missed my last blatantly misogynistic comment, “Ever been married?”

“Three or four times.”

“Three or four?”

“Four times if you count five days as man and wife a marriage.”

“What happened there?”

“Do you always ask so many goddamn questions?”

“I just figure if we’re going to be working together we might want to know a little about each other. And since you don’t seem at all interested in getting to know me...”

I crumple up my cigarette butt and toss it out the window. It’s cold outside but welcomed, so I leave the window cracked to let the crisp night air wash into the stuffy Suburban.

“I know everything I need to know about you, Roxanne.”

“Mm kay, well for starters you should know that nobody calls me Roxanne. Call me Anne.”

“Why not your real name?”

“I hate that name.”

“I kind of like it.”

She sighs. “Do you remember that song by the Police?”

Almost on top of her I belt out a line, “Roxxannnnne!”

“Yeah, that’s the one.” She throws up a hand to silence my rendition that’s way more Eddie Murphy than Sting. “There’s something about having your name forever associated with a hooker that just doesn’t sit well with me.”

“You dun have ta put on da red light. Roxxannnnne! You dun have ta, sell yer budy to da night.”

“Special Agent Goodwin will be fine.”

“Roxanne Margaret Goodwin. Graduated MIT third in her class where she majored in Computer Science and Molecular Biology with a

minor in physics. Not sure what you planned to do with that godawful hodgepodge of a major?”

“Mapping the human genome came to mind.”

It was a rhetorical question. “Later she obtained her Master of Science degree in one short year. Daughter to Patti and Ronald Goodwin, she was born in Ontario Canada but moved to the states at the age of three. Guess the presidency is out of the question for you? She lives in a spacious apartment on the corner of sixth and Union, has a cat named Spock, enjoys sci-fi films—big shocker there—and the occasional romantic comedy. She’s single, never been married, no children, and her closest living blood relative besides mom—dad passed away six years ago, my condolences—is her seemingly estranged sister, Claudette.” I light another cigarette. She doesn’t respond, just stares straight ahead at the dark road as it’s swallowed up under the hood of the Suburban.

“You’re not the only one who knows how to use a computer,” I tell her, and then take an exceptionally long drag off my freshly lit smoke.

Public records plus one of her annual psych evals *borrowed* from a file cabinet in the office of the voluptuous Doctor Carrie Dent after a late night giving her the best oral sex of her life on her oiled pine desk. And let’s not forget her pathetically uninspired online dating profile I hacked.

“Sounds like you did your research. Didn’t bother to read the file on Doctor Grant though, did you?”

“My brain is so utterly full of actual important information I fear I’m one manila file full of pointless bullshit away from having the truly useful details of my life come leaking out my ears. No more knowing my social security number, middle name, my home address, where I parked my car...”

“You don’t think the case notes might be classified as *useful*?”

I ignore her ridiculous question and instead ask, “One thing I can’t figure out about you, Roxanne; MIT, the sciences, graduating summa cum laude, and now this? The FBI pays shit, you get shot at, and aside from the extremely rare missing scientist in the Missouri Ozarks cases, I think all those years of test tubes and computer screens might be wasted

on us. Plus I can't figure out for the life of me why they would stick a probationary agent like you with someone like me. And for the record, no I don't think the case notes are important. The only reason, and I mean the only reason the fucking Bureau was called in on this case is because this guy is a media magnet. That and the sheriff's office of Po-Dunk Middle of Nowhere County here, couldn't tell the difference between a dead body and a sex doll.

"This guy's no harm to anyone. This isn't the start of some sadistic prick's morbid crime spree. This is a waste of fucking time. There're terror cells setting up shop on the corners of Martin Luther King and Main Street all over this U. S. of A. We got foreign insurgents and cartel drug mules threatening our borders. This country's on the brink of revolution, but here we are driving up Satan's asshole to examine the corpse of some prick who likely lost his marbles and fried himself in one of his own mad scientist contraptions."

Another moment of silence. *Not what you expected?*

"You're not the least bit intrigued?" she asks.

"What color my barista's panties are intrigues me, but she's married and I know for a fact she's faithful and as much a waste of my time as this assignment is."

Agent Goodwin rocks her head side to side in apparent disgust. A sidelong look, a tsk, and then, "You're not at all what I expected, Special Agent Singer."

"Bill. You can call me, Bill, Roxanne. And what did you expect?"

"Well for starters, I expected someone with a little more, more, I don't know—"

"Sunshine?"

"I was going to say refinement, class, tact, professionalism, polish—"

"I get it."

"We studied some of your cases at the Academy, you know? Either those case files were written by someone with the world's biggest pair of

rose-colored glasses, or you were a different man back then. You tracked down the Ice Box Bomber in two months. Using the degradation speed of dry ice in the three inert packages in order to narrow the search radius was genius.”

I'm listening, Goodwin.

“Locating the Zerkev brothers after the Portsmouth mass shooting within seven hours—that was brilliant detective work. Stopping the planned assassination of Senator Rabaro—”

“They have you studying my case files at the Academy?”

She nodded. “Before meeting you, I have to admit, I was, well, thrilled at the prospect of working with you, Special Agent Singer.”

I light another cigarette, roll up the window, take an exceptionally long drag, fill my lungs to capacity, and then billow the smoke out to fill the confines of the car. “Yeah well, you know what they say, Roxanne...never meet your heroes.”

Chapter 3



By the time we reach the cabin, the suns broken the cusp of the mountains to the east. It's admittedly peaceful out here. All the colors of fall have begun to show; vibrant orange maple leaves, various hues of green and brown all lit up by the early morning rays as if touched by flame.

As we pull up the long, gravel drive, we spot the first sign of life out here in the Ozarks aside from ourselves. A line of news vans and police cruisers are parked along the fringe of the driveway running straight up to the cordoned off estate. I say estate, because this place is anything but—

“Holy hell,” exclaims Agent Goodwin. “Now that’s what I call a cabin.”

“Now that’s what I call a lot of frickin’ ground to cover. Goddamn it. Doc couldn’t have been holed up in a quaint little camping cabin. He just had to have a damn Bond villain’s lair. How the hell do you even get something like this built all of the way out here?”

A single story dwelling hewed right into the rock of a protruding hillside. What is visible above ground looks expansive, perhaps two or three thousand square feet of high tech luxury, minus any windows that haven’t been boarded up from the inside. What lies beneath the rock,

well, Agent Goodwin is absolutely giddy to find out and I'm absolutely beside myself that what I thought would be an hour or so to survey the crime scene will now most certainly entail an entire inventory of this mad prick's underground fortress.

Several Carroll County sheriffs' deputies wait for us on the other side of the yellow police line. Camera crews from the local news affiliates all snap pictures of us as we pull up in our cliché black Suburban. The men in black are here. This will make for some good popcorn and soda television on the six o'clock news.

I ooze out of the car, straighten my leather jacket, put on my shades (primarily to block out the bright sunlight that now wreaks havoc on my soon-to-be hangover), and stroll up to the police tape that surrounds the above ground portion of the Mad Doctor's fortress.

"Special Agent Singer. And this is Special Agent Goodwin." I flip open my badge for the deputy behind the tape. Goodwin follows suit.

"Been expectin' ya," he replies, as he lifts up the tape for Goodwin and I to duck under. "Name's Brennen. And this," he points to the house, "this here is the damned strangest thing I've seen in my twenty-five years wearin' dis here badge."

Agent Goodwin sweeps a hand out toward the expansive estate. "Is this supposed to be out here? These are forest service roads, aren't they?"

"Yes ma'am. This here's all DNR land. We do come across da occasional survival nut or hermit livin' out here. And though it ain't exactly legal, they ain't hurtin' no one, so we mostly leave 'im be. This though..."

"Doubt they're living like this," I say.

We near the entrance. Somewhere in the distance I hear a generator kick on. Deputy Brennen points to a motion sensor above the lintel. The door that you'd typically find below the lintel has been knocked clean off its hinges. "What happened here?"

Brennen, a weathered old southern boy with a full beard and a cowboy hat, removes his hat and dabs his brow with a handkerchief. It's not even seven AM and already the heat's oppressive as hell. "Well, we

only stumbled upon da home ‘ere due to a massive surge on da power converter nearby. Turns out whoever’d ben holed up in dare tapped directly inta da power-line and ben syphonin’ off juice for quite a spell. But this surge was a big ‘un. Fried da nearby transformer. When the crew came out to fix ‘er, welp, they noticed it’d ben tapped and followed da line back ‘ere.”

I step over a yellow evidence marker that lay on the doorstep and over the door itself that lay battered on the entry floor. “And the door, Deputy?”

“Ah well, ya see dem cables dare?” Deputy Brennen points to some thick electrical cables running out from beneath the fallen door. They run along the floor and up a wall to what looks like some sort of breaker panel. “Sent 40,000 volts straight through Billy Cole. Fried ‘im like a Thanksgiving turkey. Poor son-a-bitch died right ‘ere on da stoop.” He points back at the yellow evidence marker.

I give him a look like I’m about to hit him. Deputy Brennen swallows hard and then says, “So the door, right? Well we a, we a knocked it off da hinges to get inside, then cut dem cables so they wouldn’t fry none of my deputies.”

“Or you could’ve killed the generator,” Goodwin mutters.

“Could a done that,” replies the deputy, as if bashing the door down with a rubber gripped sledgehammer was a far superior idea.

Agent Goodwin darts out in front of me once inside the estate with a half exclamation point half question mark on her lips. Her eyes float as she surveys the interior. Every wall is covered in silver foil from floor to ceiling—the ceiling too for that matter. She peels some back off the wall only to reveal another layer of foil.

“Whole house is wrapped in foil.” Deputy Brennen dabs his brow once more. Can’t blame him. It’s a sauna in here. I feel like I’m standing in an oven and any minute someone is going to slam the door shut and spin the dial to ten.

Agent Goodwin snaps a few photos. I take off my leather jacket and toss it on an arm chair in the foyer. “Show me the corpse.”

Deputy Brennen nods then strolls through the foyer down a long hall. “Watch yer step. No power to da house anymore. Just da generator that ran that ole trap on the door. And there ain’t no windows in here neither, so it’s dark as a horse’s tokus.” He slaps a flashlight to his palm a few times until it lights up. “You need a light, Agents?” Goodwin and I pull our small Maglites out of our pockets and click them on. Deputy Brennen nods approvingly and hollers, “This way.”

At the end of the hall we cross the threshold into what I can only imagine was once a rec room of sorts. The home’s former occupant was using it more as a storage area, for now the expansive space is filled floor to ceiling with boxes.

“Anyone gone through any of this yet?” asks Goodwin, snapping more pictures.

“No, ma’am. I was told to wait for yall to arrive and to not touch nuthin’. So that’s what I done. This way.” He rounds a corner out of the cluttered room, past an open door that leads into an equally cluttered bedroom, down another long hall past a kitchen piled high with dirty dishes and abuzz with flies, and into an office—the only marginally clean and put together room in the entire home, it would seem.

Agent Goodwin is in front of me with my flashlight on her ass. It’s a nice ass, I notice for the first time—a Pilates’ ass, I suppose. And as I’m pondering whether she’s wearing panties or a thong under those tight jeans, the charnel smell hits me and I’m sucked out of my little fantasy and back into the macabre present. She cups her nose as she enters the office.

“Bit strong,” remarks Brennen. He steps around the side of a desk. On the desk are two metal handgrips attached to a wooden box covered in dials. And on the floor at Deputy Brennen’s feet lie a pile of bones and another yellow evidence marker. The skeleton is all puddled up as if it were never put together in the first place. Not a single strand of tendon or ligament remains, just charred, blackened bones. And amidst the bones, a small pile of ash.

“You found it just like this?” I ask.

Deputy Brennen nods toward a pile of clothes on the far side of the desk. A pair of overalls, socks, shoes, and a button-up red flannel lies in a heap. “Them clothes were intermixed with da remains dare.”

“What do you mean, *intermixed*?” asks Goodwin. A few more pictures with her digital camera. The snap of the shutter brings my headache back full round.

Deputy Brennen tilts his head and scratches his beard. “Hard to believe, but it was like it was still wearin’ ‘em.” He chuckles, but garnering no supporting chuckle from either of us, stifles it and clears his throat.

Goodwin grabs a pen off the desk and bends down next to the heap of clothes. She lifts the flannel shirt up and shines her flashlight through the fabric. “Are you sure that’s how they found it?”

“Ma’am, there’s no ‘they’. I was the first on da scene. And that’s how it was. Scout’s honor.”

The flannel spins slowly before her eyes. “No burns on the fabric at all. Just some soot and residue on the inside.” She drops the shirt and begins sifting through the rest of the clothes. “Not a lot of ash,” she says, still intrigued by the burn-free clothing.

I kneel down beside the corpse. “Haven’t you ever seen a burial urn? And those ashes include all the bones. When it comes down to it,” I carefully sift through the ashes with my own pen, “we’re not made of much at all.”

A shiny silver object catches my eye buried in the remains. It’s marred with soot, but as I clear away the bones and ash, I find a sheet of aluminum foil shaped like an oversized yarmulke. Another swipe of my pen through the ash reveals a forearm, and wrapped about the bone still buckled, a high-end watch.

I snap on a pair of rubber gloves and carefully pull the forearm out of the pile. The watch slips off the bone with ease. “Not a scratch. Not a single scorch mark.” It’s not ticking, stuck at 4:49.

“We’re going to need more detectives,” I say, as I rise to my feet and toss my forever soiled pen onto the desk. “Deputy, I need every available man you can spare up here pronto. You have a paddy wagon?”

“Yesir.”

“Good, bring it. I want them going through every one of those boxes back there. If anything appears out of the ordinary, load it up into the wagon and send it to our Branson office. They’ll get it to me. Everything else you just set aside for now.”

Agent Goodwin perks up, stands, and asks, “Special Agent Singer, can I speak with you for a moment?”

“What is it, Goodwin?”

“In private.”

Deputy Brennen huffs, makes a fractious smile and says, “I’ll leave you two alone,” then exits the room.

“What?” I bark at her after he’s gone.

She steps around the remains on the floor and comes in close enough for a kiss. “You want a legion of Carroll County sheriff’s deputies sifting through our crime scene? Do you think it’s—”

“Yes I think it’s wise.”

“Or are you just too lazy to do the work yourself?”

I just stare at the little bitch for a moment. With our flashlights trained on the floor I can’t see her eyes, just the silhouette of her heart-shaped face. Those eyes, they could be any color at all; it’s anybody’s guess, though somehow I know they’re blue. I’m suddenly overwhelmed by the urge to hit her...or kiss her. I get those two mixed up sometimes.

With calm candor I reply, “If we want to solve this case we’re going to need a legion to sift through all this evidence.” I glance around, shine my flashlight at the aluminum foil covered walls and ceiling, at the bizarre apparatus on the desk that strangely resembles one of those carnival shock sticks you hold onto as the electricity builds until you can’t stand it any longer, to the piles of notes on the desk, to the

chalkboard covered in what to me looks like alien hieroglyphics, to the old picture tube TV on a stand in the back of the room next to a camera on a tripod pointed directly at the—”

“Camera,” I blurt out with the light still trained on it. Goodwin joins her flashlight to mine. An old VHS camcorder sits at the back of the room facing the desk. Below the camera; neatly stacked piles of labeled VHS tapes.

“Deputy Brennen,” I shout, and he dutifully comes bumbling back into the room with a, “Yessir?”

“Can we get the power turned back on in here?”

“Um, well, I think the power crew cut the line when they repaired da transformer.”

“There’s a generator on the property, right? How about you have one of those boys from the power company hook that on up to the electrical grid here so we can turn these lights on? In fact, how about you just figure out how to turn these lights on and keep them on?”

Deputy Brennen looks perturbed. I care not in the slightest. “Could be more, ya know, booby traps and what not. Sure dat’s safe?”

“I’ll risk it.”

After he vacates the room I return my attention to the VHS tapes. Each is dated, and most have a handwritten label on the front. I read one aloud, “Postulations on String Theory.”

Goodwin walks over to me and starts to help box up all the tapes. “It’s what he’s best known for.”

“Postulating?”

“String Theory. You do know what String Theory is?”

“Oh sure.” *I haven’t the slightest damn clue.*

“He won a Nobel Prize for his quadratic string field equation which proved, at least mathematically, what physicists have been *postulating* for years.”

“Oh, and what’s that?”

“That there are an infinite number of universes.”

“Get the fuck out of here.”

Goodwin strolls over to the chalkboard and points at an excessively long string of numbers and letters and parenthesis and equations all scribbled down from one corner to the next—not an inch of black space untapped. “It’s all right here.”

“Forgive me if I’m a bit skeptical.”

“This isn’t science fiction, Singer. Mankind first theorized the existence of the atom before Jesus Christ walked the Earth. It was later qualified using mathematical proofs like this one here, but it would take nearly two millennia before anyone could definitively prove their existence. You do believe in atoms, right? Give it a few more years and there’ll be more than math to prove the existence of parallel universes. We may even get to see one.”

I pick up another tape, *Daemon Resonance Test 1* is written in nearly illegible handwriting on the label. “Take a look at this.” I hold the tape so Goodwin can see the label. “Demon resonance,” I say.

She repeats it aloud, correcting my pronunciation. “Daemon. Spelled with an ‘a’. Like a computer Daemon. And before you ask, it’s a term that originated at MIT, so I should know. Stolen from Greek mythology, a demon,” emphasis on the ‘e’, “was simply a supernatural being that lived within us, worked on us without us knowing, with no particular bias toward good or evil.”

“And a Daemon?”

“A computer program that runs in the background without the direct control of the user. They lie dormant, like an inert cancer cell just waiting for some specific condition to awaken them.”

“Like a computer virus?”

“They can be used as a virus, sure.”

“Put it in the box.”

“Intrigued yet, Singer?”

I glance over at the pile of bones and ash, then at the untouched clothes on the floor. My flashlight flares off the aluminum foil wallpaper. No matter how hard I try and turn it off, my brain whirls with possibilities. I try not to care. I really don't want to care.

I try...and fail.

Am I intrigued, Roxanne? “I'll admit it. My curiosity's been tickled. Shit. I think I need to have a look at that case file.”