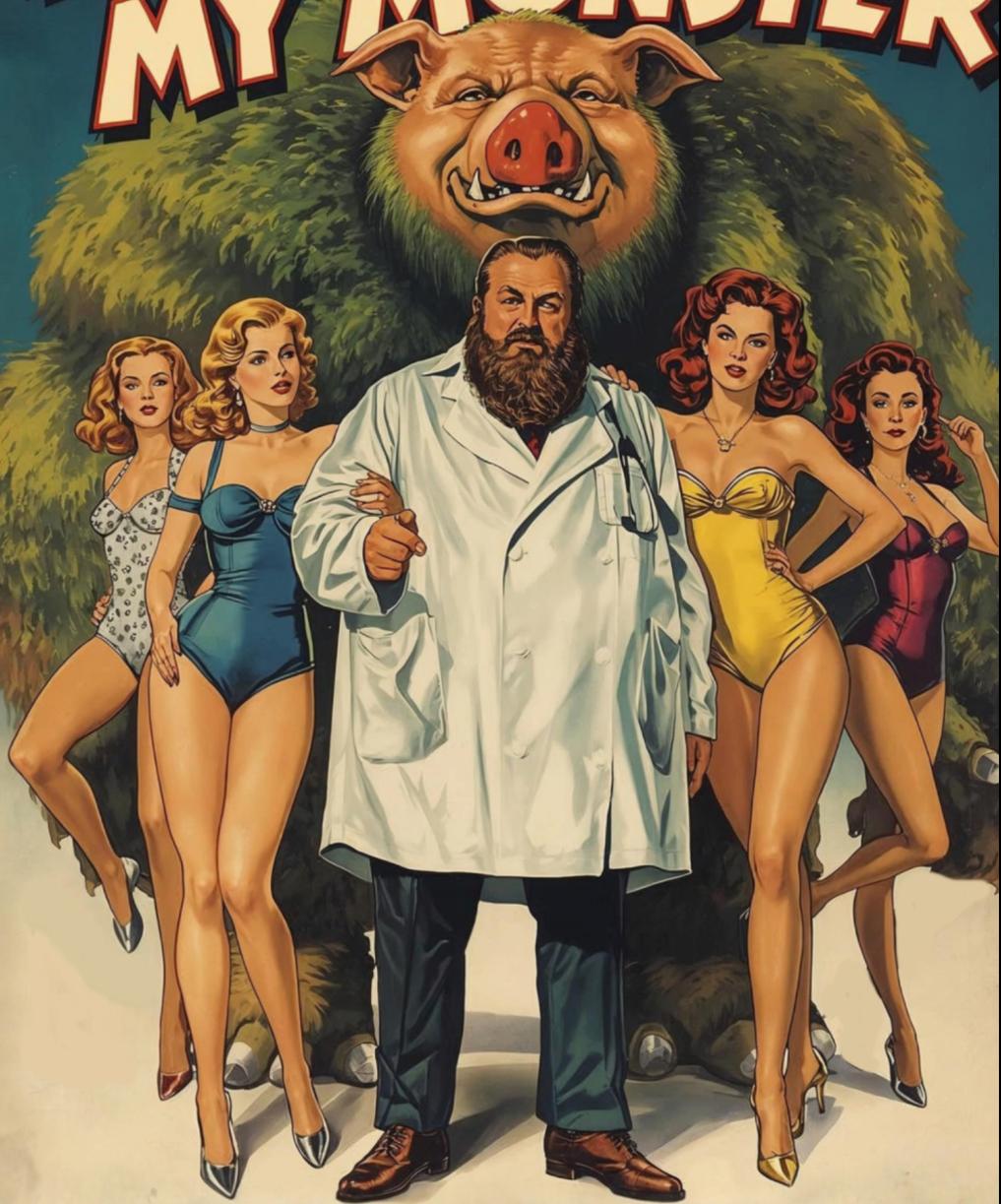


LOVE ME, LOVE MY MONSTER



Floyd Jones

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CHAPTER 1

RUSSIAN COLLUSION

“Sometimes it is necessary to be lonely in order to prove that you are right.” — Vladimir Putin

Alexei was growing more agitated with each passing second. He paced nervously around the tenth floor office where he and a comrade were waiting to meet a spy they had been ordered to brief on a most important mission for the Kremlin.

“Where is Natalia?” he asked. “She is late!”

“Don’t worry, she’ll be here,” Viktor responded. “Natalia is very reliable. We have sent her on many missions just like this, and she has never failed.”

Alexei took a long drag off his cigarette. “She had better be as good as you say,” he said ominously. “The fate of the world, and especially of Mother Russia, hangs in the balance!”

Just then, the door opened and an unusually attractive woman entered the room. Statuesque and raven-haired, with an hourglass physique, she looked every bit like the beauty pageant champion she had been a few years earlier, before she had been recruited by the KGB.

“Good evening, comrades,” Natalia said. “Sorry I’m late.”

“We’ll overlook it,” Alexei replied sternly. “Viktor tells me you’re very good. The two of you have worked together before, yes?”

A devilish smile swept across Natalia’s face. “Yes, we’ve worked together,” she said, as she flashed Viktor a flirtatious look. Viktor looked away quickly, not wanting to let Alexei see him blush. All three of them had worked this sort of mission before... the “honey pot,” where they used a sexy woman as bait to trap a man. Viktor, who was not quite thirty years old and handsome, tended to bed the spy babes he worked with before they had a chance to use their feminine wiles on their quarry. Alexei — older, fatter, and balder — never had women throwing themselves at him, and so he was a bit jealous of his partner. He had also seen missions go sideways when the people he was working with got distracted. Over the years, he had developed an all-business attitude and was quite intolerant of any hanky-panky except where the job called for it.

“This assignment is of the utmost importance,” Alexei said. “Here, take these.”

He handed Natalia a folder full of documents. She took a seat at the head of the room’s long conference table and began looking over the papers, and especially at the candid photos of a 50-something, thin-haired, somewhat heavyset man, as her comrade continued the briefing.

“This man — Dr. Anthony Hinch — has made a tremendous scientific discovery, the details of which need not concern you. In point of fact, we don’t really know that much about it ourselves.

However, our spies assure us that Hinch's discovery is so monumental that we are to make every effort — and spare no expense — to get our hands on it."

"Where do I come in?" Natalia asked.

"You have a way with men, da?"

"If you say so."

"I do. Well, it just so happens that our Dr. Hinch is a widower... his wife died in an accident about two years ago."

"And he's actively looking for Wife Number Two!" Viktor added.

"That's correct," Alexei continued. "He has gone on several dates lately, but lucky for us, nothing has worked out yet. He is looking forward to meeting you tomorrow night!"

Natalia's eyes widened. "You set it up already?"

"He has been corresponding with one of our agents over the internet," Viktor informed her.

She laughed. "I see. You want me to seduce the good doctor and steal the plans for his invention, or whatever it is."

Alexei smiled broadly. "Very good," he said. "We understand each other."

Later that night, back in the hotel room in which she was staying, Natalia pored over the documents she had been given, memorizing every detail about Dr. Hinch and reviewing the conversations he had had with the agent he thought was her. Except for the fact that she normally had a little more lead time and typically handled the initial contact herself, this was the

usual procedure. Tonight she was in Philadelphia; tomorrow she might be in New York or Boston or Cleveland or wherever. Her handlers took care of the travel arrangements; all she had to do was make the target fall in love with her, steal whatever it was the agency wanted, and then liquidate him. No one was ever left alive.

Sure, it was a rough business, and sometimes she actually felt sorry for her victims, but who has time for questions of morality? Did anyone show *her* such consideration? Hardly. Obviously, the agency used her, and the men she enticed were little better... they just wanted to get in her pants. So why should she feel bad for them? “Everybody looks out for Number One,” she told herself, and besides, she had her orders. Disobedience was not an option... and so she shoved those nagging doubts and ethical concerns to the side and focused on doing her job.

She learned the basics... Anthony (Tony, to his friends) was born in Morgantown, West Virginia, on November 1st (All Saints Day), fifty-six years ago. He developed a love for science at an early age and studied biology in college. Later, he moved to Delaware to work with one of the big chemical companies there, examining bacteria and viruses and assorted other microorganisms, testing them to determine if they were safe for the public. He investigated sources of water contamination, tested food products to ensure they were safe to eat, and so on. His work saved lives and brought in big bucks to his employer and their clients in industry, and he was rewarded with a high-level position where he raked in lots of dough. Eventually, he left

the corporate world and formed his own research company. This company employed several scientists who were the top men in their fields; they had patented several new inventions and inked lucrative contracts with both government agencies and private sector firms.

An interesting character, Natalia mused as she put down the file and climbed into bed for the night. But the question remained — what in the world had this guy come up with that was so important to the KGB?

CHAPTER 2

THE SPY WHO LOVED DOCTOR HINCH

Or rather, pretended to love him.

The Luxe Gourmet is one of those fancy-schmancy restaurants that doesn't tolerate hooligans. If you show up wearing shorts, exposed undergarments, sweatpants, or anything along those lines, they'll kick you right the hell out of there. Tony and his wife used to frequent the joint regularly before her untimely demise.

(Her name, by the way, was Barbara... she was a Professor of Geology at nearby Temple University. She and Tony had met at a scientific conference a decade or so ago and had been married for nearly three years before "the incident." While working late one night, she went to get a snack from one of the university's vending machines. The chips she purchased got stuck, so she slid her hand inside the machine and tried to pull the bag out. This turned out not to be as easy as she expected. The bag stubbornly refused to come out, so she proceeded to rock the machine back and forth and accidentally tipped it over... trapping her underneath and crushing her to death.)

Anyway, Tony still dug the place. You can't go wrong ordering anything on the menu, and for dessert, the cheesecake... it's superb.

So on this warm, mid-autumn evening, Tony found himself waiting for Natalia outside the restaurant, when suddenly he found himself being harassed by a fly. He swatted at it furiously, but then heard a voice call out to him, "Hey, watch it now! Don't swat me!"

"What the —?" Tony muttered, perplexed.

The fly stopped buzzing around and hovered a couple of feet in front of his face. Tony looked at it carefully.

"It's me! Dr. Jankowski! Remember I told you I was working on a new, miniature drone?"

Tony recognized the voice. Dr. Jankowski was one of his colleagues down at the Institute. "Oh, yeah!," he replied. "The little ones that look like bugs!"

"Yup!" Jankowski said. "We're gonna sell a million of these to the Defense Department! And now we've got 'em outfitted with nice, new cameras. They broadcast crystal-clear, 6K video over a fifty-mile radius! I can see you right now!"

"Oh, great... what are you watching *me* for?"

"I heard you got a date tonight! I wanna see who shows up!"

"Me, too!" another voice chimed in.

"Say 'hello' to Dr. Parker!" Jankowski said.

"¡Ay, caramba!" Tony exclaimed. "Who else is there? Why can't you grape-heads mind your own business?"

In his office, Dr. Parker turned to Dr. Jankowski. “Grape-heads?” he asked. “Who’s he talking to?”

“I think he means you!” Jankowski replied. Then he turned his attention back to the computer monitor where he could see Tony.

“Dr. Parker says he thinks your date is gonna be one of those ‘transgender’ chicks. I don’t think so, though.”

“Ooh, you guys are so annoying!” Tony fumed, and then started again to swat the “fly.”

At that moment, Natalia approached Dr. Hinch. She stopped and watched for a bit as he swatted furiously at the drone/fly.

“Give me some privacy, you bastards!” Tony yelled. Just then, he noticed her standing there. She looked ravishing in a tight-fitting sleeveless red dress. “Oh, hello,” he stammered.

“You are Tony, right?” Natalia asked.

“I am. You must be Natalia.”

“Yes... the flies here, they’re a problem?”

“No, not really,” he responded, before taking one last swipe at Jankowski’s drone, knocking it into some nearby bushes. “They’re just a little nosy, that’s all. We’ll be OK inside.”

Back in Jankowski’s office, he and Dr. Parker watched as their TV screen suddenly went black.

“Aww, looks like he got ya!” Parker said sadly.

“A lucky shot! You know, I’m getting really good at maneuvering these things!”

“Hey, did you happen to get a look at Tony’s date?” Parker asked. “Not bad, eh?”

“Yeah, pretty sweet. Told ya she’d be a real chick.”

“Don’t be so sure,” Parker replied. “There are some beautiful men out there.”

Dr. Jankowski sighed. “I just it works out for him. You know, he’s one of those guys that needs to be married. Being single doesn’t suit him.”

“I know what you mean. The problem with a guy like him is that he’s so naive. Any good lookin’ broad will have him wrapped around her little finger.”

Meanwhile, back at the restaurant, the hostess led Tony and Natalia to their table. “I think science is so interesting,” Natalia said once they had taken their seats. “You must be involved in many fascinating endeavors!”

“Yeah,” Tony responded, “I’ve been at this whole Research and Development thing for quite a few years now, and... oh, the stories I could tell!”

“Really? Such as?”

“Well, for example, there was this time a few years ago when one of my colleagues, Dr. Maxwell, invented a stink ray, and...”

“A stink ray?” Natalia asked.

“Yeah,” Tony explained, “it’s a kind of gun where, when you shoot somebody with it, they smell like a skunk — worse than that, actually — for days. Well, Maxwell had manufactured a few of these things, and he passed them around to some of the guys in the office, including me. So we went up onto the roof of the laboratory and, just for kicks, started shooting people at random.”

Natalia smiled. “So, you and your fellow scientists are a very mature group of men?”

Suddenly feeling a bit embarrassed, Tony looked down at the table. “Of course, it’s not always like that. Usually, we’re working on more important things. But you’d be surprised... that stink ray, for example, can be very useful at quelling protests and such. Although usually, your protester-types tend to be pretty smelly already.”

“So, what are you working on now?”

“Oh, lately I’ve been working on this one project... I can’t really tell you about it, though. Are you familiar with fractal geometry?”

“Not at all.”

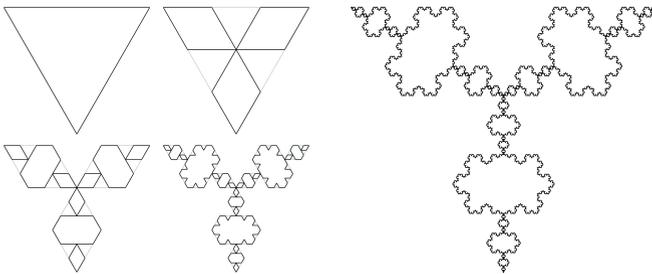
“Oh, it’s fascinating stuff,” he told her. “You see, a fractal is a never-ending pattern. They’re infinitely complex and self-similar across different scales. You create them by repeating a simple process over and over. Geometrically, they exist in between our familiar dimensions, and yet fractal patterns are extremely familiar, because nature is full of them. Trees, rivers, coastlines, mountains, clouds, seashells... anyway, the project I’ve been working on has something to do with that. Only it’s mixed with some ideas I had about cellular biology.”

“Do tell.”

“You see, nothing in nature is what it appears to be,” Tony continued. “We think of matter as being tiny bits of solid stuff; atoms being the smallest particles of material. But the reality is that everything in the universe is just energy. This energy

vibrates in a particular manner, forming patterns... and these patterns can be manipulated.”

He pulled a pen out of the pocket of his jacket and started drawing on his napkin. “To give you a simple example, you can create something called a Koch anti-snowflake by drawing an equilateral triangle, and then dividing each side into three equal segments. Then you draw an inward-pointing triangle on the middle segment. After that, you remove the middle segment and replace it with the two slanted sides of the new inward triangle. Finally, we cut a notch and repeat for every side. After the first iteration, our shape now has twelve sides: each original side has become four smaller segments, one of which has been inverted.



If we keep repeating the same process, it gets interesting very quickly. And when you do this sort of thing at the molecular level... well, with a few tweaks you can create pretty much anything you want. But it’s kind of a top secret, hush-hush thing right now.”

Natalia leaned in toward Tony, reached under the table and put her hand on his right knee. “Maybe if we got to know each other better, you’d tell me more?” she asked.

An hour or so later, Tony and Natalia found themselves walking aimlessly around the city streets, talking about this and that.

“So what made you become a scientist in the first place?” Natalia inquired. “Were you always interested in such things, even as a child?”

“Oh, sure,” he answered. “Like a lot of guys my age, I grew up watching things like *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* — all that sci-fi stuff. It always seemed to me that there was so much promise — so much potential to make the world a better place. By the time I got to college, I just knew that this was the career field that God would want me to get into.”

Natalia was visibly startled. This was something she hadn’t seen in the dossier. “God? You believe in God?” she asked.

“Oh, yeah, absolutely. I know a lot of people think that scientists are much less religious than the general population, but that’s a misconception. A lot of us scientists are religious.”

“That surprises me. I mean, aren’t science and religion, like, totally incompatible?”

“I don’t think so,” Tony said. “Here’s the way I see things: I believe in everything that has been proven scientifically... gravity, the Big Bang, even evolution. I’m on board with all that stuff. But there are questions that science can’t answer, like why

does the universe exist? What's the meaning of life? What's the proper basis for determining what's moral or immoral? For me, that's where religion comes in."

"OK. Well, that's very interesting. I'm surprised to hear that coming from a great scientist such as yourself."

"Well, I don't know that I'd say I'm a great scientist... I mean, I'm no Einstein, but you know, I do OK."

Natalia smiled and punched him playfully on the arm. "I think you're pretty terrific. And very handsome, too," she said sweetly.

Tony's face turned crimson. He looked away from her bashfully. No one had called him handsome in years... probably not since his college days, if then. Not even his wife had thought he was particularly good-looking.

"Aww, shucks!" he gushed. "I'll tell you what — if you're interested, you can come over to my place and I'll show you that thing I've been working on."

Natalia knew she had him. She was good at this sort of thing, and experienced enough to know when she had a fellow hooked.

"Is this some sort of pickup line?" she asked. "Like 'I've got some lovely etchings in my apartment?'"

"Oh, gosh, that's an old line! You know that one, eh?"

"Of course. A girl needs to be prepared for things like that. Plus, I watch a lot of old movies. But as for your offer, yes, of course, I'm very interested to see what you've come up with."

Across the street, Natalia's comrades were secretly watching and listening to the couple from inside a van.

“Great success!” Alexei exclaimed, as he and Viktor high-fived each other.

An hour or so later, Tony’s car pulled to a stop in front of his house. “Welcome to Casa de Hinch!” he told her.

Natalia could hardly believe her eyes. This was no normal house. In fact, it hardly seemed right to call it a *house* at all... the enormous building featured stone walls, towering spires, soaring stained glass windows, majestic turrets... it was like something out of a fairy tale... or perhaps a 1930’s horror movie.

“*This* is your house?” she said incredulously. “You live in a castle?”

“Yup! Come on in, I’ll show you around.”

The castle gates closed behind them, forcing Alexei to pull their van over to the side of the road. They needed to be within approximately five hundred feet of Natalia to be able to hear the signal from the microphones she was wearing (cleverly disguised as earrings.)

Viktor frantically adjusted the knobs on his audio receiving device, but to no avail. The signal, which had been clear as a bell until now, abruptly turned to static.

“We’ve lost her. Natalia is on her own!” Viktor told his comrade. “I hope she’ll be OK.”

Inside the castle, Tony and Natalia entered his enormous living room. The ceiling was nearly fifty feet high, and the room was lit from the candles on a Gothic-style chandelier as well as tapered candles in wrought-iron candlestick holders scattered

here and there. Heavy velvet curtains covered the windows, and lovely, ornate oak furniture filled the space. The walls were decorated with medieval art and a huge coat of arms. He poured two glasses of red wine and offered one to her.

“Thank you,” Natalia said, accepting the glass from him. She looked around the room, wide-eyed. “This house of yours is fabulous!”

“Why, thank you,” he replied. “This castle was built in 1754. It had fallen into disrepair, but since it’s considered a historic site, I was able to buy it for a very reasonable price. All I had to do was agree to fix it up.”

“Really? That’s fascinating. So... you were going to show me something? Your latest experiment?”

Tony hastily downed his wine and set the glass down on a table. “Indeed I was,” he said, “but before I let you see it, I just ask for one indulgence. You’ve got to put this on first.” He fumbled around in a chest of drawers and found a handkerchief, which he handed to her.

“This is for what?” Natalia asked.

“This is so I can do sort of an unveiling. I don’t want you to see what I’m about to show you until just the right moment. I’ll lead you down to the basement.”

Natalia gulped down her wine, set her glass aside, and wrapped the blindfold around her head. Tony helped her to tie it in the back, took her by the hand, and led her out of the room and down a long staircase.

“You know, ordinarily I would never let a man do this to me on a first date!” Natalia told him as they descended the steps.

“Oh, superstitious, eh?”

“It’s only because you have a reputation for being such a great scientist that I’m going along with this.”

As they continued... and continued... and continued to walk down the steps, Natalia began to wonder if they’d ever reach the bottom. They must have descended eight or nine stories, but it was impossible to tell because they never reached a landing. Rather, the staircase just wound around in giant circles. At last, however, they did reach the bottom. Natalia could sense that she and Tony were in a much smaller room than the one they were in previously. She correctly intuited that this new room had a low ceiling, cement-brick walls, and was dimly lit by one lone light bulb above her head.

“You’re almost there,” Tony said, as he guided her into position. “Now you stand right there, and I’ll press this button...”

Tony stepped over to the wall a few feet in front of Natalia. A large steel door was there, and beside it, a panel with two buttons. Tony pressed the top button and the door slid open, revealing iron bars and behind them, an adjoining room. Like the room they were in, this second room was also dimly lit by a lone ceiling light. The silhouette of a large figure could be seen inside, slowly approaching the doorway. Tony then pressed the second button, opening up the bars that had blocked the entrance to the room.

“There!” Tony said proudly. “Now you can take off your blindfold.”

Natalia removed the blindfold, but instead of looking forward into the doorway, she looked down, reached into her purse and pulled out a pistol.

The shadowy figure from the other room crept silently nearer and nearer to her.

“Surprise!” Tony said.

“Finally! And now I have a surprise for you, too, Doctor...”

She looked up and saw a large creature standing in front of her... roughly seven feet tall, human-like in many respects, but covered in dark green fur that looked vaguely like seaweed, and a head that resembled that of a pig, except for its enormous mouth, which was filled with razor-sharp teeth like those of a great white shark. Its fiery red eyes burned in anger and it growled fiercely. Natalia screamed in terror and dropped her gun to the floor.

Then suddenly, the creature jumped on top of her and ripped her to shreds.

CHAPTER 3

THE SCIENCE COMPANY

“Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”
—Arthur C. Clarke

The next day, over at the Institute, Dr. Cornelius Parker was busy in his laboratory, writing formulas on a blackboard and checking them against figures in a notebook. “It just might work. *It just might work!!*” he mused to himself. Just then, he heard a knock on the door.

“Yes? Who is it?” he asked. The door opened and a pasty-faced, bald-headed janitor carrying a mop and bucket entered the room.

The Institute — or, more formally, the Philadelphia Institute of Scientific Advancement — was a company founded by Dr. Hinch and Dr. Parker several years earlier. Parker, one of Tony’s friends from his days in the corporate world, was into computational biology and chemistry. Like Tony, he had come to love science as a boy, but what got him interested was magic rather than science fiction. He was fascinated by the idea of boggling people’s minds by doing things that seemed impossible, and he dreamed of a world free of crime, disease, poverty, etc. How cool would it be to be the one to solve problems like these?

Dr. Anthony "Tony" Hinch, a brilliant but lonely scientist, lost his wife a few years ago and now is ready to dip his toe back into the dating pool. There's just one minor problem: his most ambitious creation — a hulking, grotesque monster who lives in his basement — keeps killing off his dates.

Meanwhile, deep in the bowels of the Philadelphia Institute of Scientific Advancement, janitor Alan Cooper dreams of escaping his mop & bucket job and making it big as a stand-up comedian. Unfortunately, his path to comedic glory is blocked by a corrupt union boss (and his inability to remember his jokes.)

As Dr. Hinch's dating life spirals out of control and Alan's comedic aspirations face sabotage, their lives unexpectedly intertwine. Can Dr. Hinch control his monstrous creation, find love, and help Alan achieve his dreams? Or will the monster and the union goons succeed in keeping them both down?

