

STOLEN SKIES



TIM POWERS



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SUNDAY
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CHAPTER ONE:

Hands Like Steam Shovels

After making good time through Reston on Highway 267, the government Chevy Suburban slowed as brake lights flashed on in the dark highway lanes ahead of it.

Slouched in the passenger seat, Ingrid Castine watched the black silhouettes of the trees alongside the highway bending in the wind against the the paler night sky. She was glad to stretch her legs several inches farther than she'd been able to during the last eight hours, in the coach seat of the American Airlines flight from London's Heathrow Airport to Dulles International.

Even with the heavier traffic, the drive would probably be less than an hour. It was a familiar ride, down past the Beltway Loop through Falls Church toward the Potomac, but she wouldn't be going to the Office of Naval Research building, as she usually did—tonight she was summoned to an office in the Pentagon.

Probably she was to be transferred again. She had been recruited into the Transportation Utility Agency right out

of college eight years ago, and five years later the TUA had been terminated, and she'd been shuffled to the Office of Naval Intelligence; and then last year she had been transferred to what was—as of yesterday, at least—her present job, as a field investigator with the Office of Naval Research.

The jobs had all proved to be disquietingly weird. What could be next? she wondered sourly. Was there a Sub-Department of Tactical Astrology? An Auxiliary Office of Dowsing?

She shifted in her seat and glanced at the driver. Short haircut, dark suit—apparently in his early thirties like herself. He had been professionally cheerful when he had met her at the disembarking gate and opened his wallet to show her an Office of Naval Intelligence identification card, and had obligingly wheeled her suitcase to the waiting Suburban and stashed it in the back, but when she had asked why it was ONI that was picking her up, and why she was being taken to the Pentagon, he had simply shaken his head in evident distaste. She had got the impression that his answer would have been, *Some damn fool thing*.

As usual, she thought now, and she shivered. And with my peculiar ability, or handicap, I seem to make things worse.

Castine had never told her employers that ever since a traumatic crisis in May of 2017 she had not been securely fixed in sequential time, as just about everyone else was; if she deliberately caused her vision to blur, and then made herself focus *past* the shapes she saw, she was generally able to see her surroundings as they had been

in the recent past—from a couple of minutes earlier to a bit more than an hour. The retro-views seldom lasted longer than a minute, but during them she was blind and deaf to whatever might be going on in real time, so she only sought them deliberately when she was alone, and she had found that drinking lots of coffee could reliably keep them from happening spontaneously.

A man in California had been with her in the crisis three years ago, and shared her peculiar ability, but she hadn't spoken to him in more than a year. At that time the echo-vision, as he had called the phenomenon, had for a period of about a month shown them only sequential views of an old house where terrible things had happened fifty years earlier; but those views had been projected into the psychic ether by a man who died in 2018, and the echo-vision had worked reliably since then, in the few instances when she had ventured to use it.

Worked reliably, she amended, until last night. The Office of Naval Research travel order had come just after her supervisor in Wiltshire made his report on that night's operation.

To her right, the full moon was intermittently visible through the waving black tree limbs. Somewhere beyond them lay Fort Myers and Arlington Cemetery. There had been trees bending in a night wind in Wiltshire too, twenty-some hours ago, with this same full moon above them; and she was too tired now to push back the memory of what she had seen, or hallucinated, in that English field off the A360, just south of Tilshead.

She quickly turned away, toward the driver. "How do I get in?" she asked, just to hear her own voice here.

He rolled his wrist on the steering wheel to glance at his watch. "You've got your phone on you?"

Castine tapped the front of her coat. "Of course."

He nodded. "When you scan your ONR badge at the entrance security checkpoint, you'll get a text code to enter on a keypad there."

She hadn't run into that on her several previous visits to the Pentagon. "Okay," she said, and added, "Sorry to wreck your evening."

He just shrugged and went on squinting at the cars ahead. Evidently he didn't want to talk. She sighed and looked back out the window at the trees.

That field in Wiltshire was nearly four thousand miles behind her, but over the new-upholstery smell of the car's interior she could almost catch the remembered reek of crushed and scorched English wheat stalks.

For the last four months she had been assigned to a Naval Research field office in Southampton. One of her main duties had been to drive out into the country in the middle of the night with a team of four other special agents, and make convincing crop circles in one or another of the many fields of wheat and barley that were accessible from the main roads.

It hadn't been easy. Plant stalks in genuine crop circles showed expulsion cavities and elongated nodes, so Castine's ONR team had had to bring along a generator to power a couple of portable microwave guns that they'd jury-rigged from disassembled microwave ovens, and sweep their beams across the bases of as many of the plants as time permitted; one night they had accidentally radiated a cell phone one of the team had dropped, and

the phone had exploded. And, again to match the characteristics of the real thing, they had had to heat a lot of magnetized iron pellets and toss them around. The final part of the task had been to simply drag boards on ropes across the fields to flatten the grain, using Leica laser surveying meters to make their patterns symmetrical.

And then after a few days, during which their elaborate crop circles would have been noticed and have drawn the excited attention of the public, Castine and her team would revisit the sites in their official Office of Naval Research capacity, and prove that they had been hoaxes. The exploded cell phone had proved to be so effective as a debunking detail that they had used the trick again a couple of times.

And the ONR field office maintained a fleet of drones, equipped with directional microphones and infrared scopes, that flew low over the Wiltshire fields at night to spot new, *genuine* crop circles—and the remote pilots were careful not to fly a drone directly over one because the little aircraft always lost power then, and sometimes blew up. When a genuine circle was located, Castine and her team raced to the spot and trampled conspicuous pathways from the nearest road to the new pattern of mysteriously flattened grain, and dropped cigarette butts and empty beer cans and crumpled petrol station receipts among the whorls of horizontal stalks. They generally hadn't even needed to revisit those—the curious public was quick to find the deposited litter and dismiss the sites as hoaxes without any help.

Last night—which was further in the past for her than for most people, since she had flown from east to west at

500 miles an hour for eight hours—Castine and her ONR team had got a positive signal from one of the drones, and piled into their van and sped along the A360 to the indicated wheat field a mile south of Tilshead.

There were ONR-mandated precautions to be observed when entering a genuine crop circle. Bursts of alpha and beta radiation had been detected at a couple of sites, and the research agents carried hand-held radiation meters; and lately among the cultists and cranks who flocked to every newly reported site there were wild and unsubstantiated stories of people being lifted from their feet and thrown impossible distances, and patches of cold so intense that monitoring cameras spontaneously shattered and couldn't be touched for hours. That was all obvious nonsense, but in the last month the ONR team *had* found that the sites became very cold shortly after the phenomena had occurred.

The ONR agents approached each site carefully, and they maintained continuous, if sometimes inexplicably sporadic, radio contact with the field office in Southampton. Castine always dutifully followed the procedures, but until last night in the field beside the A360 she had never encountered anything but the silent, mystifying symbols imprinted in the landscapes of grain.

And until last night Castine had not experienced any of the physical ill-effects that had sometimes afflicted her fellow agents and the tourists who visited the spots later—tingling of the skin, dizziness, spontaneous weeping, even hallucinations—but that had changed when she tried to question a woman they found in that field.

The flattened pattern in the wheat had been wide in the moonlight, stretching a hundred yards in a set of variously sized spirals and a couple of torn-up areas closer to hand. Even from ground-level, by moonlight, Castine could see that it was one of the more complex patterns that had been showing up just in the last couple of weeks, with, in ONR terms, “extensions and double-dumbbells and curling entourages of diminishing grapeshot prints.” And, as often lately, she could dimly make out a whirlwind-like column of dust standing above the center of the pattern.

Castine had found the woman, cowering and unable to speak, crouched in a sort of nest she had made for herself off one of the smaller curls of the pattern.

The woman was about twenty years old, dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt, and Castine had had to pull her hand out of her mouth to stop her chewing her already bloody fingers; and Castine had spun around in alarm when the woman suddenly gasped and pointed past her; but there was nothing to be seen besides the rows of standing wheat that bordered the flattened and interwoven stalks.

Whatever had happened there, it was over—the pattern was finished and the characteristic intense chill was beginning to set in. But this woman had seen something that had frightened her out of her senses. Castine and her team had arrived within ten minutes of the drone’s signal, though, so the event had been recent.

While the other agents lifted the still-speechless woman to her feet and half-carried her back toward the van, Castine looked out across the field in the direction

the woman had pointed, and—quickly before she could change her mind—let her eyes unfocus.

The field and the sky were now abstract variously gray shapes in her vision, and she made herself look past their now-meaningless streaks, past the insignificantly immediate moment.

Her view of the field brightened slightly, though the light was a color comparable to copper, and she recalled that the man in California who shared the echo-vision ability had speculated that it might be infrared light, received directly in the primary visual cortex and not through the narrow-band retinas.

Tiny spots of brightness, invisible to normal sight, would be the characteristic hot iron pellets, but Castine's attention wasn't on them.

Thirty feet ahead of her in the round clearing was—had recently been, rather—what appeared to be three naked and malformed figures, hunched close together and facing away. Castine shuddered, for though the expanses of bare striated flesh were shifting and flexing, they were as dark as the standing wheat behind them, and in the echo-visions living flesh glowed.

Then, still viewing the events of the recent past, Castine saw the woman in jeans and a flannel shirt step from behind her and walk hesitantly toward the three cold, pulsing figures. In the dimness of echo-vision, the woman's resolute profile was luminous.

At that point the triple shape straightened and pivoted heavily, and Castine saw that it was actually just one thing—what she had supposed were two outer figures were now visibly two enormous hands, fists, compacting

the mat of flattened wheat. Between the hands, dwarfed by them, stood a spindly humanoid figure with bulging eyes in a grotesquely long and oversized head; a long tongue protruded from its wide-lipped mouth.

The fingers of one of its hands unfolded outward, tearing up the matted wheat stalks, and then its shovel-sized fingernails dug in and pulled the narrow body forward. Its eyes rolled in different directions in its misshapen head.

The woman turned and rushed right through Castine's immaterial viewpoint, her mouth open in a muffled scream; and though there was no physical contact, Castine recoiled backward and fell onto the interwoven carpet of wheat stalks, shivering with fright and revulsion; and even as she rolled over and scrambled to her feet, the night dimmed back to normal vision and real time, and when she turned breathlessly to look behind her, the clearing was empty in the moonlight.

Certainly no such monster as she had seen could be hidden anywhere nearby. She was still shivering, as much from the shockingly intrustive overlap with the woman's past image as from the sight of the awful creature dragging itself across the stalks.

Her fall and panicky recovery, and her fast breathing, had alarmed the other agents, and the one in charge, a burly old lieutenant, had hurried up to her and pulled her aside.

"What," he'd said flatly.

"The thing that woman saw," Castine had gasped, "it—" She shook her head and looked longingly toward the van.

He had glanced quickly around at the evidently empty field. “What am I missing?”

“Not now, maybe ten minutes ago. It—”

“Oh?” He had stepped back and squinted at her. “Okay. What, then—skinny, with a big head and big eyes?”

“And—hands!—like steam shovels—!”

He had slowly shaken his head. Finally he had told her, “Shut up about it for now.”

The team had driven the catatonic woman to the Salisbury District Hospital, and had then returned to the field office in Southampton. As dawn filtered through the Venetian blinds of the cluttered squad room, Castine had composed a report on the night’s operation—omitting, after only a moment’s consideration, any mention of her brief vision or hallucination—and had then driven to her nearby flat. After she’d got five hours of restless sleep her supervisor had phoned to tell her that she was to report to the Pentagon in Washington D.C. by the earliest possible transport, which had proven to be the American Airlines flight out of Heathrow Airport.

Castine had never seen the Pentagon at night, and when her driver sped past the heliports of the Remote Delivery Facility and stopped at the foot of the stairs leading up to the River Entrance, she stared out the window at the building. The tall pillars, lit white from below, and the row of closed wooden doors behind the bases of them, looked forbidding.

The driver had got out and walked around to open her door, letting in a cold breeze that smelled of the Potomac River. “You’ve got a room at the DoubleTree on Army

Navy Drive,” he said as she stepped out. “Your luggage will be there.”

“Thanks.” She gave him a nod, and walked across the pavement to the stairs, shivering in her wool coat.

Her appointment was for 11 PM, at an office on the fifth floor of the C Ring, and when she had got past security and made her way up the stairs, she walked for what she thought must have been some respectable fraction of a mile along the uniformly wainscoted corridors, past two angles of the five-sided building. A couple of men in gray business suits hurried past her at one point, their shoes tapping on the gleaming floor, but they didn’t glance at her. When she arrived at last at the indicated office, she was a bit more than half an hour early.

The tall, polished oak door was closed, and she pushed a button beside it, very aware that the clothes she was wearing were ones she had put on more than twelve hours ago in England. She ran her fingers ineffectually through her auburn hair, wishing she’d found an opportunity to brush it, but at least patted it into place over the bullet scar above her right ear.

The door was pulled open by a stocky young man in blue service dress uniform with silver lieutenant bars on his lapels; he had some ribbons too, but Castine didn’t know what they signified. He gave only a cursory glance to the VISITOR badge she had been wearing on a lanyard around her neck ever since passing through security, and she guessed that the guards had called to announce her arrival.

He nodded and waved her into what was clearly a waiting room—track lights on the ceiling cast a reflected

glow on two brown leather couches, a low wooden table with nothing on it, and framed pictures of 1950s-futuristic jet airplanes hung on the cream-colored walls. There was a door in the far wall, and a small chrome refrigerator humming in the corner between the couches, and Castine caught a whiff of clove-scented smoke on the chilled air.

“Special Agent Castine,” the young lieutenant said. “Commander Lubitz wasn’t expecting you till eleven—at the earliest, what with a trans-Atlantic flight and all.” He looked around at the room as if it were his job to keep it tidy. Apparently satisfied, he glanced at his watch and went on, “He’ll be back in forty minutes. There are drinks in the refrigerator—sandwiches too, if the airline didn’t feed you. Do make yourself comfortable.” He opened his mouth as if to say more, then just bowed and left the room through the hallway door, closing it firmly behind him.

Castine stared at the closed door for a few moments, then crossed to the refrigerator and crouched to pull it open. She took out a cellophane-wrapped turkey sandwich and, after a brief hesitation, reached past a little bottle of Merlot and took a can of Coca-Cola. She carried them to the table and sat down on the nearest couch. The sandwich wrapping proved to contain also a packet of mustard and a tiny napkin. She fell to, hungrily.

Five minutes later she balled up the cellophane and, not seeing a waste basket, tucked it into her coat pocket, then wiped her mouth and pushed the napkin in after the cellophane.

She still had about twenty minutes and she wondered if the lieutenant would have left, if she hadn’t arrived.

Sub-Department of Tactical Astrology, she thought

wryly. Twenty minutes—why not take a look around, in a non-chronological way? If anybody should come in, they'll imagine I've just fallen asleep—natural enough, after my noted *trans-Atlantic flight*. The echo-vision interludes seldom last longer than a minute, and if anybody should shake my shoulder, I can fill whatever remains of that time with stretching and yawning and apologizing for having dozed off.

She looked at her watch, then sat back and stared across the table toward the other couch; and within a few seconds her field of vision had lost all apparent depth, and was just varicolored shapes jostled together as if on a flat surface. She exhaled and made her eyes focus past the now-meaningless jumble.

The light was suddenly dimmer, lit only by the familiar non-color of echo-vision.

She jumped and shifted back, for there were three men visible in the room now—then, rather, however long ago this scene had taken place. Two were in business suits, one of them with close-cropped hair that appeared pale and was probably white, the other dark-haired and shorter. The third man, in a black turtleneck sweater, had a dark, theatrically pointed goatee—definitely not military. That one gestured as he spoke, and she saw that he was holding a cigarette; the tip glowed brightly. Now the older man was speaking, but Castine could catch only a faint murmur, and wished she could read lips.

She looked down at the table. Beside a glass ashtray was a stack of papers, and she leaned forward and peered at them. By the dim echo-light she was only able to read the title, which was in bigger type and bold-faced: PLEIADES.

Still in the echo-vision, the hallway door swung open and an Asian woman of about Castine's age stepped into the room. She wore a pale jacket and slacks, and her dark hair was cut short. She didn't smile as she nodded toward the two men.

The woman had just taken a step forward when Castine's vision abruptly regained light and color, and she was looking at the point in the empty room where the woman had been—had been some time ago, possibly as long ago as two hours.

Castine glanced around and verified that she was still alone, and she looked at her watch again; she had only been seeing by echo-vision, oblivious to events in real time, for a minute or less.

She stood up, careful of her balance, and was peering at the pictures of odd old airplanes when the hallway door behind her opened. She turned around, feeling a bit guilty now for having spied on the people who had been in this room some while ago, and saw the older man from the echo-vision walk in and close the door.

He crossed to where Castine stood and looked at her badge. His short hair was indeed white by the normal illumination of the track lights, and his well-cut suit was brown wool. "Special Agent Castine," he said, raising his eyes to meet hers. "I hope you're not too jet-lagged." After several seconds he turned away and opened the door in the far wall.

"I'm sure I'll be fine, sir," said Castine. The man didn't move or speak, so she repressed a shrug and stepped past him into a wide but windowless office that was harshly lit by bare fluorescent tubes recessed in the ceiling. "I, uh,

only landed a couple of hours ago,” she added, just to fill the silence. I wonder if I’m in actual trouble, she thought. And I must look like a corpse in this light! Shouldn’t there be a plexiglass panel over those fluorescents?

Maps and graphs and shelves packed with black binders covered the walls, and more binders were stacked on the carpet. The man followed her in and waved toward two office chairs near the desk, and Castine sat down in the one whose view was not blocked by the back of a computer monitor. Again she caught a whiff of clove-scented smoke.

“I’m Commander Jack Lubitz,” the man said as he made his way around the stacks and lowered himself into a chair on the other side of the desk, “and I’m borrowing you from ONR for a specific assignment.” He sat back then, steepling his fingers and squinting at her over the tips of them.

At least I’m not fired, thought Castine. When several seconds had gone by in silence, she stirred and said, “Am I back in Naval Intelligence?”

“Ostensibly.” Lubitz looked down at his desk. “Your supervisor in England,” he said, “claims you saw something in a crop circle field last night.” He looked up at her. “Hands like steam shovels?”

“That’s what the witness told me,” said Castine, reflexively lying to conceal, as always, her limited ability to see recent past events. “A hallucination, obviously.”

“Obviously,” echoed Lubitz, nodding.

When he said nothing further, she asked, cautiously, “What is the assignment?”

Lubitz pursed his lips, sighed, and said, “There’s a man

who has . . . become aware of certain highly classified aberrant information. It's vitally important that he be located and questioned."

Castine's heart sank. Rushing her here from England by ambiguous authority—for an obviously ad-hoc 11 PM meeting with an officer in civvies—and, most telling, the word *aberrant*, which had been used by the ONR office in England to describe the genuine, mysteriously occurring crop circles: she guessed, reluctantly, who the man in question might be.

She had to ask, but tried to sound merely tired and impatient. "Who is he?"

"We believe his name is Herbert Woods," Lubitz said, "sometimes known as Sebastian Vickery."