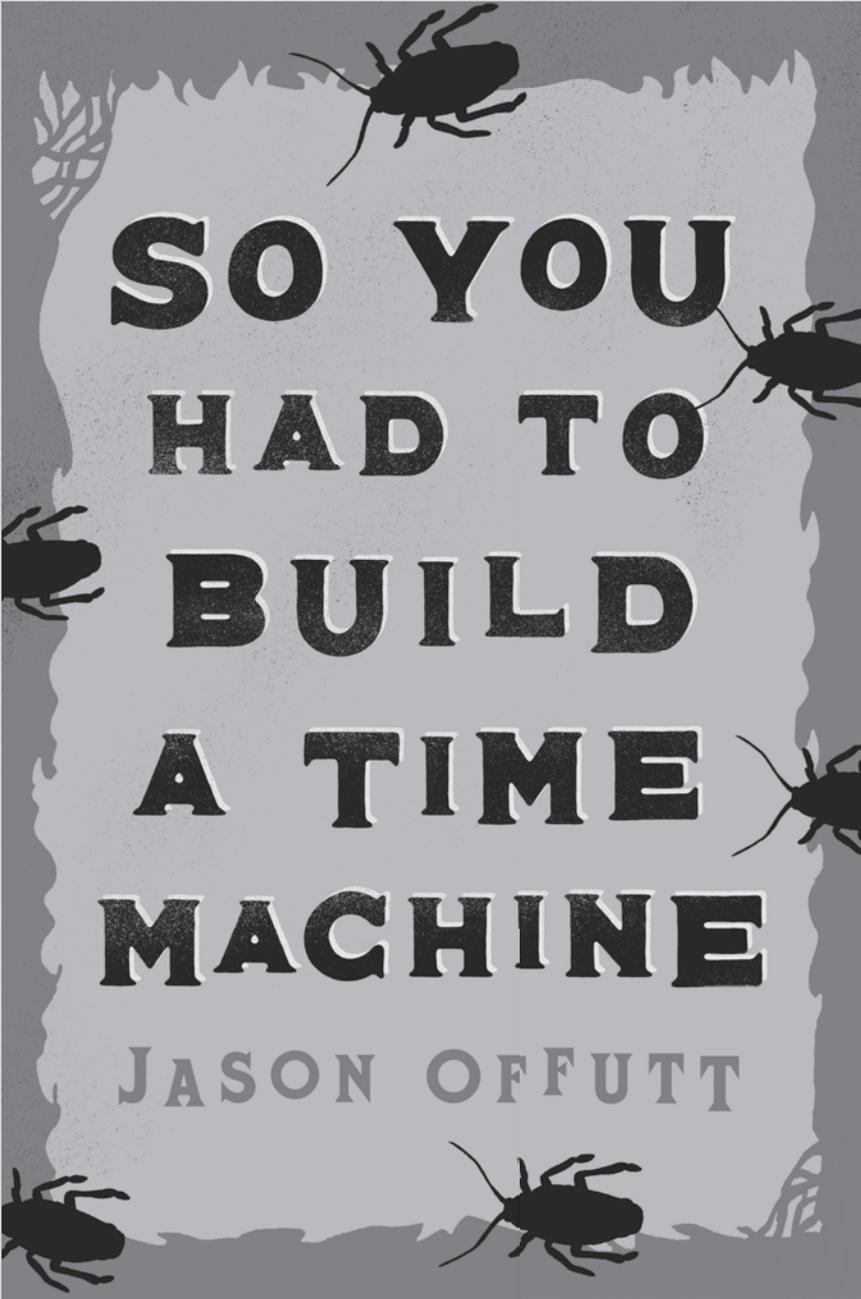


**SO YOU
HAD TO
BUILD
A TIME
MACHINE**

JASON OFFUTT

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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Road Closed

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*For my wife,
who has supported me through everything.*

“Today’s leading scientists grew up on Doctor Who and Star Trek. Every one of us has dreamed of stepping inside the TARDIS or transporting into a parallel dimension. We’re close to making that happen.”

—KARL MILLER, THEORETICAL PHYSICIST

“The days are strange. I’m not sure why, but something’s not right. Has anyone else noticed an odd feeling?”

—BIG CHUCK, KANSAS CITY RADIO HOST

“Issa blass foo gibbidy hoom.”

—GORDON GILSTRAP, GNARLY DUDE

CHAPTER ONE

SEPTEMBER 1

1

IT WAS A WARM, pleasant Kansas City evening, the sun dropping below the skyline as Skid walked home from work. A drink in a friendly quiet place to unwind, she thought, would be nice. Slap Happy's Dance Club was not that place. It was crowded, loud, and for whatever reason Skid liked it. Sitting at the bar, she ordered a vodka tonic, smiling at the people on the dance floor. People she had no interest in talking to. That was a headache she could do without, not that anyone would bother her tonight. She hadn't washed her hair in two days, and she was sporting a sweat-stained T-shirt.

Then some moron sat next to her.

"Hey," he said, startling Skid. That barstool had been empty a second ago. The guy was about forty and dressed in Dockers. A whiff of ozone hung in the air around him. *I hope that's not his cologne.*

Skid nodded. "Hey."

He looked nice enough, but lots of people looked nice. Her father Randall wouldn't approve of him, but Randall didn't approve of anyone.

“I’m Dave,” Dockers guy said. “Let me buy you a drink.”

Skid froze. *Let me buy you a drink* wouldn’t fly tonight. No, sir. Her plans were: Drink. Relax. Go home. Do not repeat. *I shouldn’t have come in here.*

“I’m Skid and thanks, but no th—” The bartender set a Bud Light in front of her. “—anks.”

“You’re welcome,” Dave said through the neck of his bottle, and Skid knew this conversation wasn’t going to end well.

A frown pulled on the corners of her mouth as she turned away from Dave and looked across the dance floor. A big hairy guy in red flannel stood next to the bathrooms. He could have stepped off the side of a Brawny Paper Towel package. Yikes.

“Is Skid your Christian name?” Dave asked, laughing, “The Book of Marks, right?”

Don’t do it. Don’t talk to him. Her last relationship ended two months ago when a thirty-two-year-old fool who acted like a teenager thought dating a nineteen-year-old behind Skid’s back was a good idea. Spoiler alert, it wasn’t. She’d successfully avoided men in her life since that one (*Guy? Jerk? Loser?*) and planned to keep it that way. She wanted a quiet life of watering plants, reading, and sitting in coffee shops ignoring everyone, especially those pretentious types who thought they were poets. She also wanted to find a couple of women who liked to binge watch online baking shows and didn’t make her want to jump out a window. Of course, that would mean getting close to someone.

Now there was this guy.

She turned to him. Dave who drank Bud Light grinned at her like he’d just won twenty bucks on a scratchers ticket. Skid never bought scratchers tickets.

“I had a wreck when I was a kid,” she said, pausing for a drink. “Russian dancing bear, clown car, motorcycle, and tire skids. The usual. Now, if you—”

“Your last name’s Roe, isn’t it?” Bud Light Dave said.

“Maybe.” Skid cut him a side look then elaborately looked around the bar for someone, anyone else, to talk to besides Bud Light Dave. There were no good prospects, so she decided to finish her drink, leave, and pick up Thai food on the way home. Stopping at Slap Happy’s Dance Club was looking like a bad idea. Her eyes briefly met those of Brawny Man, who quickly turned away. The giant stood scanning the room with his back to the wall.

She sucked the last bit of vodka tonic from her highball glass, slurping around the ice. The bartender set down his lemon-cutting knife (absolutely the wrong knife for the job, Skid noted) and motioned to her empty glass. She shook her head.

“I’m a doctor,” Bud Light Dave suddenly said, which seemed as likely as him being Mr. Spock from *Star Trek*.

She squinted at him. “Sorry. I don’t have any pain. Unless I count you.”

Bud Light Dave took a long suck off his bottle. “I’m not that kind of doctor. I’m a theoretical physicist. I spend most of my day postulating space-time.”

Maybe, she considered, he actually thought he *was* Spock. She’d dated worse.

“Where?” Skid asked.

Bud Light Dave gazed at a beer poster, the guy holding a can of cheap brew and way too old for the bikini model next to him. “A little place south of town. Probably never heard of it.”

“Try me.”

“Lemaître Labs,” he said, turning to face her. “But I probably shouldn’t have mentioned that,” his voice suddenly a whisper lost in the music.

She had heard of the place, a government weapons lab. Skid lifted her empty glass and swirled, ice clanking the sides. *Leave. Leave, Skid. Go home.*

But Skid couldn't resist two things: one, knee-jerk self-defense, and, two, proving someone wrong.

"Okay, science boy," she said, setting down the glass. "What's the underlying problem with the Schrödinger's cat scenario nobody talks about?"

A smile broke across Bud Light Dave's face. He smiled a lot. "I knew there was a reason I sat by you." He leaned back on his bar stool. "It's not so much of a problem as it is an ethical dilemma. We don't know if the cat inside the box is alive or dead, but we do know looking inside will kill it if it still is alive. At this point, the cat isn't alive, and it isn't dead. It's alive *and* dead. The would-be observer has to ask himself a question: should I, or should I not open the box, therefore preventing, or perhaps causing, the zombie catpocalypse?"

For a moment, just a moment, Skid considered she may have misjudged this guy. "Yes, but I was going more for chastising Erwin Schrödinger for being a bad pet owner."

This brought out a laugh, and Skid realized Bud Light Dave's smile was kind of nice, and, maybe the way his eyes looked in the dim bar light was kind of nice, too. She shook her head. *No. Go home, now.*

"What about you?" he said. "What was all that about the Russian dancing bear and the clown car? You don't look like the type."

"Excuse me?" Her eyes flashed. She'd dealt with this kind of bullshit all her life and hated it. "What do you mean by 'type'?"

He took a drink and shrugged. "If I may perpetuate a probably unrealistic stereotype: four teeth, gang tattoos, rap sheet, the usual. You seem too well-educated to be a carney."

Standing, she jammed her glass onto the bar coaster. "My father had a master's degree in chemical engineering and worked at Los Alamos National Laboratory before he ran the family business."

Bud Light Dave nodded. "Los Alamos? Daddy was not a lightweight. What's the family business?"

Skid stretched over the bar and plucked the knife from its citrus-stained cutting board. “Hey,” the bartender barked. She ignored him.

“A circus,” she said. “I grew up in a fucking circus.” Skid took a deep breath and drew the knife behind her ear, holding it by the tip of the blade.

Bud Light Dave was motionless. Someone behind Skid shouted, and Brawny Man took a step toward her but stopped. Skid lined up the too-attractive fake-boob model in the Dos Equis poster at the end of the bar.

“Skid,” someone said. Bud Light Dave probably, but she couldn’t be distracted. *Why are you doing this, idiot? Just walk away.*

But it was too late, she’d put herself in The Zone. Skid’s arm shot forward and the knife flew from her fingertips. A blink later the knife was buried an inch into the wood paneling behind the poster, the blade pinned between Fake-Boob’s baby blues.

Skid uncurled her hands toward Bud Light Dave and wiggled her fingers. “Ta-da.”

A couple nearby clapped, but she didn’t notice. She was proving some kind of point.

“So, you were raised in a circus, huh?” Bud Light Dave said, still grinning. “What’s your rap sheet look like?”

Good people worked in the circus. Nice people. Sometimes even honest people. Family worked in the circus. Randall’s mantra ran through her head—*If something needs done, do it*—and before Skid knew what was happening, she’d pulled her right hand back in a fist and let it fly at Bud Light Dave’s stupid face.

The connection was solid. He fell backward in slow motion, the best way to fall, like Dumbledore from the Astronomy Tower, or Martin Riggs from the freeway. Blood splattered from Bud Light Dave’s nose as if he’d caught a red cold. A smell, like a doctor’s office, flooded Skid’s nostrils as he dropped. She twisted her shoulders for a follow-through with her left if she needed it, just like Carlito the

strongman had taught her, but she didn't need it. Bud Light Dave was there, on his way down, falling through air that suddenly felt thick and heavy.

He was right there. But he never hit the floor; he simply vanished.

2

The girl was hot. Problem was, her boyfriend was hot, too. He worked out, a lot, or was just naturally ripped like those TV vampires. Maybe the guy was a vampire. Damn it, vampires are so hot. Cord hated good-looking couples. He was in this business for the money, sure, but he flirted with the cute women as a bonus. A pretty boyfriend complicated matters.

"Why's it so hot in here?" asked a man built like the Muppets' Telly Monster.

Cord didn't stop at the question. He held up his left hand, his eyes focused on the EMF meter in his right.

EMF meters were useless. These devices measure AC electromagnetic fields, which are everywhere, even in nature, but especially in the kind of wiring in houses and definitely the Sanderson Murder House Cord bought because it was haunted. Supposedly. He'd installed a few extra devices in the walls to make the EMF meters ghost hunters brought with them light up like they'd discovered something. "Ghosts create electromagnetic fields," he told the skeptical ones who sometimes come through. If someone doubted him, it always made Cord smile. "You forget the Law of Conservation of Energy. Energy can neither be created nor destroyed; it can only be transformed. So, if ghosts exist, they're made of invisible energy, such as, oh, I don't know, a magnetic field. You can prove me wrong, if you'd like."

This would garner some "oohs" from the crowd, and the skeptic usually shut up.

“It’s easier to tell when you walk into a cold spot if the central air’s not on,” Court said over his shoulder. “A cold spot is a sure sign of paranormal activity.”

Or not. He didn’t know and didn’t care. Cord only cared that the people who paid him to walk into a cold spot cared.

Someone in the group of twenty grumbled behind him. The rest of them gathered in tightly to look at the meter Cord held like he was studying it. He wasn’t. His eyes were mostly on the meter, but enough on the hot girl in front of him to see her leaning over to get a better look at the readout.

“You see this number here,” he told the hot girl, his voice soft, confident, in control. *Cord, you got it goin’ tonight.* “Higher than ten milli-Gauss or lower than two milli-Gauss is a background electromagnetic reading in any normal house,” he said, then paused for effect and whispered, “but this isn’t a normal house.”

Cord smiled as he looked up into her eyes, hazel but leaning toward blue. His eyes quickly dropped back to the meter. The show must go on, and Vampire boy could seriously kick his ass.

“The meter fluctuates,” he said loud enough for the entire group to hear, “depending on what appliances are on in the house. The central air, the oven, even a hair dryer can send the number higher.” He paused again, holding up the meter so everyone could get a peek. “But a ghost. Oh, a ghost will not only hit a number higher or lower than that—” His right index finger pointed to a yellow light that was not on—yet. “This warning light will start flashing.” His finger moved expertly to a red indicator. “But when something really nasty shows up, this baby starts blinking.”

A hand raised in the back. “Yes,” Cord said, knowing what was coming. “It has blinked red in the house once.”

A slight “ooh” came from the group, except hot vampire boyfriend, who stood with his tattooed arms across his chest.

Cord smiled as he inspected the paranormal enthusiasts who’d

given him \$20 a pop to attend the 9 p.m. Sanderson Murder House Ghost Tour. Six of them had also opted for the \$428 group overnight tour (with a non-refundable \$200 deposit) where they got to sleep in the beds of the Sanderson family. Replica, of course, but they didn't know that. The Sanderson daughter off at college during Daddy's killing spree had had anything drenched with blood carted off to the landfill after the cops were through with it.

"That one occasion was on the second floor where Delbert Sanderson butchered his wife with a samurai sword in 1984."

A collective gasp filled the room.

"Has there ever been anything right here?" asked a teenage blond kid there with his mother.

"Yes," Cord said, not hesitating, nodding his head from the parlor area toward a darkened archway. "Just down this hall." He didn't like to take groups into that hallway until they'd toured the kitchen where Mrs. Sanderson once made county fair award-winning pies, and the sink where Mr. Sanderson washed the blood from his arms and face as best he could. But Cord played each group how they felt, and this group felt like it wanted action.

He slid his left hand into his front pants pocket and triggered the remote control to an enormous stereo system in a locked closet, its volume turned to 0. *You want EMF, you got EMF.* When Cord pulled his hand out it bore a tube of ChapStick. He popped the cap, applied the lip balm, capped the tube and slid it back into his pocket all with one hand. Misdirection was the shyster's best friend.

"Please tell everyone what happened in the hallway." A tall man of about seventy stood in the back of the group, well dressed and smart looking, but eyeglasses made everyone look smart. "I lived next door when the murders happened."

The tour "oohed" again. *Oh, shit. Shut up, dude.* Cord wore a grim smile when his eyes worked the people who'd paid good money to hear the grizzly details of the Sanderson crime. "This is where Delbert Sanderson chased down his thirty-two-year-old son scream-

ing, ‘This is why I never got your teeth fixed,’ before he hacked him to death.”

The man shook his head.

Goddamnit.

“No, son, that’s not quite right,” the old guy said. Cord began looking for a reason to kick the man the hell out of his haunted house. He assessed his paying customers, who were all looking at the tall old guy with his air of dignified authority and ‘I lived next door’ attitude. No one looked at Cord. His stomach tightened.

“I heard the whole thing,” the man said. “In fact, I’m the one who called the police that night.” The “oohs” turned to “whoas,” and Cord’s hands turned to fists. “It was hot that Thursday, but not so hot Cecilia—that was his wife—Cecilia had the air conditioning on. She was a bit of a penny pincher.” He paused for a second, whether for tension’s sake or if the guy just forgot where he was going with this, Cord couldn’t tell.

“Well, what did he say?” a woman in nurse’s scrubs asked.

The old guy chewed his lip before his eyes widened. “Straightened. Yes, Delbert screamed, ‘This is why I never got your teeth straightened.’ Then he hacked poor Tommy to bits in the hallway.”

Cord relaxed, a muffled sigh slowing escaped his lips. *Time to take back control. Your show’s over.* “Thank you, Mr.?”

“Wanker,” the man said.

Damn straight.

“So, after Delbert Sanderson screamed, ‘This is why I never got your teeth *straightened*,’ he chased Thomas Sanderson into this very hallway,” Cord said, then took a step forward into the hall, pretending to concentrate on the meter again, even though without his ace-in-the-hole EMF-blasting stereo playing Iron Maiden in complete silence, all he would get was a normal background reading. He waved at his tour group to follow him anyway; it was all part of the show.

The sixty-watt bulb in the ceiling fixture didn’t shed a lot of light,

but it showed all Cord wanted it to. Although the house had been cleaned and spit polished more times than he cared to count (the house had seemed to be always on the market before Cord realized what gold mine potential it had), there were stains in the hallway's hardwood floor. There weren't any stains when Cord bought the place two years ago, he just thought the suggestion of decades-old samurai sword murder blood helped with the ambiance.

Cord stepped over the carefully applied splatter of cherry wood finish stain (\$8.49 per quart and damn well worth it) and stopped. "This is where it happened."

Silence. A heavy oppression sank into the hallway, like everyone had just seen a made-for-TLC movie. And the smell. *What was that? Is somebody using Febreze?* He looked from face to face. Everyone's eyes were wide, their mouths agape.

"Didn't you say the red light flashing was bad?" the hot girl asked, her voice shaky, her shoulder pressed into vampire-boy's chest.

Red light? Cord looked at the EMF meter, the red indicator flashed like a bulb had gone bad on a cheap string of Christmas lights. The numbers on the readout changed so quickly they became a blur.

"Oh, shit," he whispered. This hadn't happened. This *never* happened. The meter only changed when Cord wanted it to change. He didn't think the house was haunted, not really. A scream split the hallway. Cord would have been satisfied to know it came from the hot girl's boyfriend, but everything happened too fast.

A man—who hadn't even paid admission—popped into existence about two feet off the floor, a look of shock on his bloody-nosed face. He fell like he'd been shoved and hit the floor with an "oof."

"What the hell?" came from someone, but Cord didn't look to see who. His eyes were on the man in the white shirt and gray Dockers who smelled like cheap beer and ozone. For a second, only a second, Cord thought he heard dance music. The guy tried to suck air into his lungs and failed the first couple of tries but was soon breathing again.

Something between a gut punch and the first drop on a roller

coaster grabbed Cord's insides in a fist. This was a ghost. A real ghost. No chains, no floating and no Scooby-Doo "whoooooo," but still, a ghost had appeared in Cord's haunted house. Cord stared at it because his eyes refused to do anything else.

But the ghost didn't look like a ghost. The white oxford shirt was wrong, and so was the blood coming from his nose. If Delbert Sanderson had sliced up his boy Tommy with a samurai sword, why did the splatter on the man come from a bloody nose?

Cord reached out his right index finger and poked the Amazing Appearing Man in the leg just to make sure. The leg was solid.

The man glared at him, confused. "Where's Skid?" he asked before, pop, he vanished again, Cord's meter flashing and spinning like he'd just hit a jackpot at a casino. Maybe he had.

Skid? nearly squeaked out, but Cord clamped down on that momentum-spoiler fast.

"Was that Tommy Sanderson?" the nurse asked. Not to Cord, to the old man.

The old guy adjusted his glasses and frowned.

Oh, please. Oh, please. Oh, please don't ruin this for me you Wanker.

"Well, I wish I'd gotten a longer look at him," the former neighbor said. Cord didn't realize it, but he was holding his breath. "But, Tommy Sanderson? It looked like him. Yeah, it looked just like him."

The breath whooshed from Cord and he sucked in another one, a big one, through a smile. "If anyone in the group is still skeptical about the paranormal," he said. "Please get your disbelief out now." Cord raised his hand to his ear in a bit of stage play overacting and waited one beat, two, three. *This is the best night of my life.* "All righty then. Would anyone like to upgrade their tour tickets to overnight tickets?"

Hands shot up faster than dandelions. *Oh, yeah, the best.*

Cord had no idea what had happened, and he didn't care. As he pocketed the extra \$1,500 on top of the \$828 he'd already made off

this group, he silently thanked the Amazing Appearing Man. Cord didn't realize until morning he hadn't even gotten the hot girl's name.

To hell with it. He had a haunted house to run.

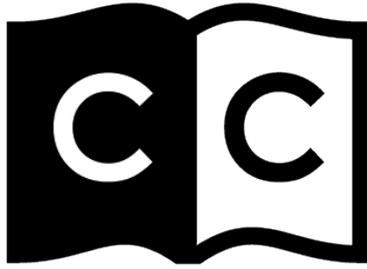
3

Brick leaned against the back wall of Slap Happy's Dance Club next to a sign that that read "Hookers and Johns" and tried not to stand out. But Brick always stood out. Growing up, it was his job on field trips to stand in the parking lot so his classmates would know where to gather. And he wasn't just tall, he was big, professional-wrestler big. This made him seem intimidating even when he told people in a soft voice that he baked muffins for a living.

He checked his phone. Beverly had been in the bathroom twenty minutes. At least a dozen women had come and gone through that door in twenty minutes. *Did she come out and I missed her?* But he knew that was more wish than reality. He scanned the club. It was full of people dancing to loud music hoping to hook up. He didn't want that; he'd just met Beverly, sure, but he kind of liked her.

Beverly seemed like a nice girl when she walked up to him at their mutually-decided first date meeting spot—in the bar area at Il Palazzo Bianco. "Oh, you just have to be Chauncey," she said in a voice that didn't sound like it could ever get on his nerves.

"Yep," he said. "Chauncey Hall." He almost followed that with, "My friends call me Brick," but stopped before the words came out. Being a Chauncey was enough of a burden. He didn't want to explain Brick.



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