

SQUATTERS

By Kathryn Flatt

Sixteen holes. Sixteen names. Coincidence? Maybe, but I smelled trouble.

Five months earlier, when I still worked for the Sheriff's Police in Brisco County, my partner and I answered a call from Chet Haggard about vandalism in his cornfield. Someone had dug holes eight feet deep and four in diameter, four rows of four holes each, spaced two feet apart in a perfect square design. At the time, only I had a theory, and it got me fired.

The sixteen names were on a list on my desk at NuGreen Environmental Solutions' newest facility for developing earth-friendly technologies for waste disposal and pollution cleanup. After my dismissal from the force made headlines, NuGreen offered me a position as Security Officer, a simple, boring job: issue identification badges, oversee security, and escort the occasional visitors wherever they needed to go. But visitors rarely came to the twenty-acre property set in the middle of farmland which made up a good seventy percent of Brisco County. Fayette, the county seat and my hometown, boasted fewer than two thousand people, the kind of place where everybody knew

everybody. A trip to the next nearest city, Omaha, constituted an all-day affair.

Sixteen new hires had started in the maintenance department over the last month, the most recent just two days earlier. Besides Horace Beecham, the facility manager, the staff had consisted of three researchers, two security guards, and a couple of warehouse laborers. The sixteen new guys more than doubled our workforce.

My fingers itched to pick up the phone and call Frankie Wallinski, my former partner, but I could hear in my head what she would say.

"Oh, no, Lindy. You're damned lucky to have landed that job. Don't go paranoid and ruin it."

Lately, I had started reevaluating that lucky coincidence, too. How convenient NuGreen was Johnny-on-the-spot with a job opening just ten miles outside of Fayette just when I needed it. How fortunate they were eager to hire me in spite of the scandal.

"People trained in law enforcement are hard to come by," Beecham had said. "Especially young ones. Usually, all the applications come from retirees."

After my three-month probationary period ended, I felt reasonably secure about employment, but then the flood of new hires skyrocketed to the magic number and my gut instincts

whirled into a tizzy. Mother Common Sense tried to silence my disquiet, and I could practically hear the townspeople talking. They would say, "There goes Lindy Stetler again, seeing UFOs and little green men everywhere." Not exactly a fair assessment of my theory about the holes, but it summed up what the media had intimated. A memory of the shame and embarrassment flooded over me, and yet my gut still did not want to accept the numerical coincidence.

Two quick knocks pulled me from my musings.

Beecham, wearing his usual tweed jacket and phony smile, stood at attention in the doorway. "Busy?"

"Not at all." The word busy almost never applied to my day.

He waddled in, and behind him came a woman: tall, big-boned, maybe in her early forties with neatly-coiffed black hair, hatchet-faced but in a fey sort of way. She entered in an awkward, jerky gait, as if her shoes did not fit right.

"Lindy Stetler, I'd like you to meet Montana Jones," Beecham said. "She's transferring from Corporate to be my assistant."

I stood and extended a hand, wondering why Beecham suddenly needed an assistant. She ruined the symmetry of the number sixteen, but my suspicions decreased not one iota.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Ms. Stetler," Montana said in a rich contralto. She shook my hand with a cool, surprisingly firm

grip, her thin-lipped mouth offering a hesitant, reserved smile. Her dark brown eyes suggested high intelligence.

"You can call me Lindy. We're pretty informal around here."

"Tomorrow will be her first official day," Beecham added. Despite my claim of informality, he always acted stiff and proper. "I'm leaving today for the kickoff meeting of the re-branding campaign at Corporate in New York. Montana will report to you in the morning for her I.D. and orientation."

I shrugged. "Works for me."

An awkward silence lasted a few seconds until Beecham filled the void. "Well then, Montana? Shall we go?"

"Nice to meet you, Lindy," she said graciously.

My nose for trouble twitched faster than a white rabbit's as I watched their retreating backs until they entered Beecham's office.

The administration building, about the size of a doublewide trailer, consisted of a tiny reception area at the front, four small offices including mine and Beecham's, and at the back, a kitchen/lunchroom and the restrooms. Laboratory, warehouse, and maintenance garage occupied a larger building deeper into the property. Very little went on in the office under complete privacy since the walls were paper thin and the doors like cardboard. Either Beecham did not realize it or did not care because he never seemed to take pains to shut his door.

Unable to ignore an impulse to eavesdrop, I headed to the kitchen. Beecham and Montana Jones were taking seats at his desk as I passed.

"But it's perfectly logical," Beecham argued. "They have a saying: keep your friends close and your enemies closer. Hiring her was Corporate's idea."

I took one of the communal mugs from the cabinet and opted for tea because brewing it gave me an excuse to linger longer.

"Or in this case, get closer to them." Montana did not sound like someone talking to the boss; she sounded like she was the boss. "I did not mince words in opposing her selection, and I intend to keep an eye on her."

I added a healthy squirt from a lemon-shaped plastic juice dispenser to my cup of Earl Grey.

"There's really nothing to worry about," Beecham countered. "After what happened, Lindy Stetler is the last person to start waving red flags."

Hearing my name made me freeze in the act of dropping the plastic stir stick in the trash.

"Perhaps, but she got a bit too near to the truth for my comfort," Montana amended. "History indicates she is smart and suspicious by nature."

A shiver ran through me the way it always did when my vague intuitions took on the solidity of real trouble. She had taken

the time to read up on me, and it kicked my self-defense mechanisms into higher gear. Back at my desk, I stared at the phone for several minutes as a theory took shape. Then I called Frankie.

"You busy?" I asked.

"Nope. Quiet day. What's up?"

"The number sixteen. Free for dinner?"

Weighty pause. "Skippers? Five-thirty?"

"Great. See ya." I hung up, disconcerted because my response to her "what's up?" had not sparked the expected admonishment. Instead, her voice had dropped in volume and pitch to become conspiratorial.

Frances Ann Wallinski and I grew up together, best friends since age five and closer than some sisters. Rooted in a small town, we peaked in our senior year of high school: I won homecoming queen and valedictorian and Frankie brought home three state championship medals for girls track and captained the debate team. Looking for an encore after graduation, we took criminal justice classes at community college and then presented our certificates to Elroy Kerrigan, Brisco County's granite-jawed, utterly terrifying sheriff. Soon after, we became the local answer to non-sex-based hiring in law enforcement. At first, everyone made jokes about two blondes in uniform riding around in a patrol vehicle like a one-car parade for equal

opportunity. They stopped laughing when, in our first eighteen months, we foiled a bank robbery, found a missing child, and determined the fire in a local farmer's barn had been set intentionally.

I truly loved it for its six-year run. While everybody always knew Frankie had brains and substance, becoming Officer Stetler proved I was more than a pretty face with a friendly disposition. Granted, Brisco County did not exactly rate as a hotbed of criminal activity, but I saw my job as keeping people I had known my whole life safe by stopping trouble before it started. And I thrived in it. A cop was the only thing I had ever become that I chose and worked to be.

At quitting time, on a whim, or maybe an instinct, I opted to follow the private road through the NuGreen campus instead of exiting from the parking lot to the highway. Past the other building, rolling hills of cropped green grass formed a deep bowl around the man-made lake occupying the southeast corner of the property. Instead of pastoral splendor, I saw it with new eyes. I knew in my soul something secret, something beyond cutting-edge research, was going on there.

I entered Skipper's Seafood around five twenty and stood at the door waiting for my eyes to adjust to the dim light. Country music issued from the jukebox as always; only the volume ever varied. The dirty-old-roadhouse décor and atmosphere kept away

the faint of heart, but the fish was excellent as long as you did not mind it deep fried. The bar drew a good crowd on Friday and Saturday nights, with out-of-town lawyers and expert witnesses in Fayette for trials at the County courthouse augmenting the local male talent. When we were in the mood, Frankie and I would get dolled up and come to Skipper's on a manhunt, and sometimes we even scored, but we were both still searching for Mr. Perfect.

I found Frankie already in line at the order window. Everything about her screamed of her heritage, from her solid countrywoman's body to her round face permanently set in an expression of stubbornness and fatalistic acceptance. She possessed a sharp mind and a sharper tongue, and managed to be attractive in her way.

We ordered: shrimp basket for me, fish and chips for her, and a pitcher of beer. Then we settled in a booth with two frosted mugs to wait for our number to be called.

She poured beer and took a long drink. "What's your sixteen?"

"Sixteen too many people."

Her blue eyes narrowed. "Funny. I got sixteen too few people."

"And can I assume the reason you're not jumping down my throat is you're ready to accept it's more than coincidence?"

Warm pink tinged her cheeks. "Come on, Lindy. Connecting the holes, well, it's just--"

"Impossible?" We often finished each other's sentences. "Actually, when I said 'too many people,' I meant the ones NuGreen's hired in the last month. Seventeen including the woman Beecham brought in today. Let's hear about yours."

Frankie pondered her mug. "Different people, different cities. All adults, male and female. Nothing in common except they might have come through this way for one reason or another. Got an F.B.I. analyst looking into a sudden spike in missing-person reports."

It fit easily into my theory, and I chased a sudden case of dry-mouth with a long swig of beer. "When did the last one go missing?"

She did not reply, but I read the answer on her face.

"April?" I guessed. The call from Chet Haggard had come in April.

"March." Normally dead-certain, ever-skeptical Frankie appeared doubtful. "Hey, old chum, I know what you're thinking, and it's just crazy."

"And what am I thinking, old pal?"

"That my sixteen missings were in the holes in Haggard's field."

"But that would mean when he called us, they'd been dug up again."

A spark of impatience glinted in her eyes. "It would also mean sixteen people buried standing upright. It would mean whoever did it took the time to precisely measure the distances between them so the whole thing came out a perfect square. And it all happened in a short timeframe right under Chet's nose."

"Are we going to discuss the hoax theory again?" I challenged. "There's no reason in the world for Chet to stage a stunt like that. You saw how he reacted to the media. And let's not forget what I--"

"Twenty-two!" boomed a voice.

Frankie shot me a warning look and went to get our food. When she returned and we started eating, she changed the subject. "These new people you got. What do they do?"

"Maintenance, or so Beecham says. I've seen each of them maybe once for their I.D. badge. Nothing special about them; typical low-level labor. But then there's today's entry." I told her about Montana Jones and the overheard conversation. "Now convince me I'm all wet that there's something skunky about this."

"I believe you," she said but then looked up sharply. "I'm still not buying the bit about Chet's holes being part of some big plot."

We had been over it a hundred times, but I cataloged the evidence anyway, counting off points on greasy fingers. "No footprints anywhere around the holes. Not enough dirt to refill them. Perfect dimen--"

"Aw, come on," she interrupted, but her scathing tone was less vehement than in the past. "I'll admit they were weird, but they don't tell us much. Now, names of people missing and names of people suddenly hired at NuGreen, that's something."

To avoid further arguments about the impossibility of my theory, I tried to introduce a more mundane hypothesis to tie it all together. "What about illegal workers? Your missings were conveniently disposed of so their identities could be farmed out to someone else, and now they work for NuGreen."

Frankie considered. "Sounds plausible, if excessive. But then why dig them up?"

I shrugged. "Maybe they needed to re-use the holes for the next batch." The old gut instinct screamed "foul" in the back of my mind, but I did not want to start her off again. "Where'd the Feds leave it?"

"Gave me a list of names and some photographs and asked if I could check around Fayette, see if anyone knew them folks. They took a stab at it, but you know how people get when the government drops in unannounced. They thought someone local might get better results."

"I wonder if your list of names matches mine."

"Doubtful. Anybody doing what you just suggested would know to avoid direct connections. More likely they'd have names from somewhere else too and mix them up, not have them all appear in the same place."

"Which means there are more missings the Fibbies aren't talking about." I swirled a shrimp in cocktail sauce. "Can you find out?"

"Maybe. The analyst guy seemed sort of young and naïve, but he might respond to feminine persuasion. He's coming back tomorrow, so I'll take a shot at batting my eyelashes at him. Can I get a copy of your list?"

I grinned and reached for my purse. "Made one before I left work." I slid the page across the table.

Frankie studied it. "No bells going off, but then I only got one look at the Fed's list. We'll see."

"Then can I get a copy of your pics? I can compare them to my sixteen."

"Good idea. I'll get them to you in the morning. And send me yours too, okay? They might want to run them against a larger group."

The cop part of my brain roared into overdrive, thrilled at the chance to be in service again. The rest of it reveled in a low-level triumph that maybe Frankie could eventually come

around to my theory about Chet Haggard's holes. I did not blame her for not sticking by me then, but at the time, she had only gone so far as to agree they signified more than casual vandalism.

We worked on our dinners for a bit. "How do you want to handle it?" I finally asked.

"Let's keep it low-key for now. We'll see if we can correlate names and pictures. I'll ask around town, just like the Feds wanted. You can try to get more info on your new people and maybe sidle up to this Wyoming woman."

"Montana," I corrected, chuckling. For some reason, naming a kid Montana did not seem as goofy as Wyoming. "She's obviously hiding something, and Beecham is too."

"If they are and it's all related, you'd better be careful not to spook her." She pushed her plastic basket away. "And we'd better be careful not to be seen with our heads together too much."

"Good thought."

"If some of the dots start to connect," Frankie added. "Then we'll feed the Feds a few innuendos and see where they take them."

We finished the evening talking about other subjects before heading home, Frankie to her apartment above the movie theater, and I to the house I grew up in, willed to me by my late

parents. Before leaving Skipper's lot, I raised the top on my Volkswagen Rabbit. I enjoyed driving with it down on a summer day, but since last April, I always felt uneasy when exposed to the nighttime sky.

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I did not sleep well and greeted the morning much too early with a dull mind and cranky disposition. When I retrieved my newspaper from the bin below the mailbox, I found a plain brown envelope folded within it. I held back opening it until I went back inside, thinking Frankie took her own warnings about discretion seriously, but a quick scan through the stack of promised photos produced no "eureka" moment.

Up early anyway, I scratched an itch and took a side trip on the way to work. The sun had begun to burn off the morning mist over the lower-lying land when I parked alongside Chet Haggard's back forty on the gravel road which separated it from NuGreen's property. The fallow field sat below grade level, and I picked my way halfway down the slope. Slight indentations were the only remaining sign of where the holes had been. Still, being on the site brought back the fateful day clearly enough to send a shiver down my spine.

After measuring the individual holes' diameter and the spacing between them, only one task remained. Being the slimmest, most agile body present at the time, I thought nothing

of shinnying down a rope for a look-see. Enclosed in the deep tube of earth, I touched the perfectly straight wall of compacted clay, solid, smooth, and slightly oily. The floor could have been of poured cement, as uniformly flat and hard. The smell reminded me of a long-ago trip to the beach at Atlantic City, salty and tangy. I tilted my head back to see a perfect circle of sky behind the heads of Chet and Frankie.

What could have made such perfect holes? My imagination cut loose and provided an image of a huge machine, a gigantic stamping device with sixteen projections to pound into the ground at the same time. Maybe hollow to take away some of the soil of which too little was accounted for on the surface. Of course, no such machine probably existed in the world, and even if it did, who could have spirited it onto Chet's field without anyone noticing?

And for what purpose? In answer, the notion of bodies going into the holes barged into my brain to give me a severe case of the creeps. I suddenly felt small, insignificant, like an amoeba under the descending foot of a giant. The time it took me to climb back out probably challenged an Olympic record or two. Safely above ground, I saw the sky in a different way: no longer a sheltering blue ceiling but the vast, unprotected edge of outer space.

The disturbing imagery remained strongly in my thoughts in the days following. Although Sheriff Kerrigan decreed the matter not worth pursuing, I kept digging, repeatedly interviewing Chet. Word got around about my investigation, and then I spoke out of turn to a persistent reporter. The tabloids picked up the story, and Fayette became a hot spot for every UFO fanatic in the five nearest states. When I would not publically retract my observations, Kerrigan dismissed me with a glare which could have turned a locomotive into a slagheap. I bore him no ill will for sticking to his own rulebook, but I did hold a grudge against the tricky little twerp from a regional television station who badgered me until I broke. Fortunately, most folks around town had forgotten the big-city-paper editorial which cast doubt on my mental stability.

"Morning."

I spun out of my reverie to face Chet Haggard. "Hi, Chet."

"Saw your car." Although ten years my senior, I found him attractive in a rugged sort of way. Last spring, he alone thought my uncanny vision of what made the holes was not a load of hogwash. During that period, our frequent contacts had suggested something greater than friendship might blossom, but then the media storm blew it all away. "Can't hardly see 'em now."

"No, you can't," I agreed. Silence reigned for a couple of minutes.

"You know Dave Spurgeon?" he asked in a tentative tone.

"The crop duster?" I turned my head to see his face.

"The same." Doubt drew Chet's mouth into a frown. "Did a job for Bob Romberg last week and saw something similar."

"Like this?" My scalp tingled, and the feeling of being small and insignificant came back strong.

"Not quite. Mounds. Lots of them."

Two cups of coffee started churning in my stomach. "He tell anyone?"

"He told Bob, but neither said nothing to anyone but me because, well, you know." Chet had suffered from the scandal too. Once the cry of "hoax" went up, everyone assumed Chet was either the mastermind or a co-conspirator. "Think we should say anything?"

The last thing I wanted to do was announce to anyone, even Chet who might be sympathetic, that I had any new suspicions about anything. "I'm not a cop anymore."

He shoved his hands in his pockets and rocked on the balls of his feet. "And it's a damn shame. You and Frankie Wallinski are two of the finest I've ever met."

"Well thank you, Chet," I said, warmed by his praise. His mention of Frankie sparked an idea. "Tell you what. Why don't

you call Frankie and tell her what Dave told you? She's working with the F.B.I. on a related matter, and I guarantee she'll take it seriously."

After a few pleasantries, he went back to his truck and I to my car. Frankie would undoubtedly make the same connection I had about Bob Romberg's incident and Chet's: both farms shared a boundary with NuGreen.

Even with my side trip, I arrived early at work, which gave me a chance to send my new people's pictures to Frankie. After a moment's reflection, I copied all the digital photos of employees on the computer and e-mailed them under the subject "Some new friends." I suspected Corporate would frown on it but told myself I had a civic duty under the circumstances.

Montana Jones arrived for work as I made coffee in the kitchen, and I set myself to my next objective: finding out whatever I could from her and about her.

For what promised to be a sultry September day, she seemed overdressed: full skirt to mid-calf, blouse under loose linen jacket.

She offered a meek smile when she noticed me checking her out. "This is how we always had to dress at Corporate. No exceptions. And the air conditioning is often a little much."

I shrugged and grabbed a cobalt-blue mug with the NuGreen logo on it from the cabinet. "Want some coffee?"

"No, thanks," she demurred. "I can't have any caffeine."

"Hmmm, guess I remain the sole coffee drinker around here. We've got some herbal teas with no caffeine."

"Such as?"

I opened the cabinet and picked through the basket. "Earl Grey, but that's fully leaded. Oh, here's lemongrass tea. Naturally caffeine free it says."

"Sounds lovely."

I handed her a mug. "These are ours to use, but we're stuck washing our own dishes."

She dispensed hot water from the spigot on the coffee maker and dipped her teabag into it. "Sugar?"

"In the drawer here."

She emptied four packets into her cup and stirred with a plastic stick.

I flicked on the light to the ladies' restroom. "And these are our wonderful toilet facilities, one for male and one for female. Make sure you knock before entering." I offered a cheerful smile and took a sip of coffee. "Well then, let's make you a badge and then I'll give you the grand tour."

"You mean this wasn't it?" she asked, eyes twinkling.

I laughed and decided I might like her. "I thought you'd want to see the other building where the labs are."

Her smile remained, but slyness flickered in her eyes for an instant. "Yes, I'd like that."

Once we finished the official stuff, we headed out in one of the golf carts for the quarter-mile drive.

"So was moving here Corporate's idea or yours?" I asked.

"Some of both," Montana replied. "I just had to get out of New York. I have some health problems, and the pollution was too much to deal with. Personnel suggested the transfer."

That did not jibe with what I had overheard the day before. "Things are pretty quiet out here. Must be a tough adjustment."

"Actually, I rather like it. I wasn't meant to be a city girl I suppose. I don't like noise or crowds or feeling closed in." Then she slyly turned the tables. "I imagine you've been through an adjustment too. Mr. Beecham says you used to be a police officer."

"True." I kept my response minimal in hopes of leading her to reveal how much she already knew. "I was fired."

"So he said. May I ask why?"

"I broke the rules. In a moment of frustration over a case, I shot my mouth off to a reporter."

"That doesn't sound so terrible."

"But Sheriff Kerrigan had a standing order for all information to the press to go through him or be approved by

him. In this case, disobeying the order resulted in a great deal of trouble, so I guess I can't blame him."

I turned off the main drive onto a gravel road leading to the other building. From a distance, the plain, square structure looked unimpressive, but once we parked beside it, its massiveness dwarfed our little cart: three stories tall, sixty thousand square feet.

"Do you come out here often?" Montana asked casually.

"Oh, I've been here maybe five or six times." I slid my badge through the reader at the door to let us into the warehouse area. "The development labs and researchers' working offices are on the second floor mezzanine. Most of this is storage, mainly maintenance stuff and research supplies."

A man in forest-green coveralls drove a forklift past us, and my paranoid frame of mind suggested he focused his gaze on Montana for a few beats too long. I studied his face, trying to decide if he had been in Frankie's photos, and so did not get a chance to see if or how Montana reacted.

After he disappeared down an aisle between rows of shelving, I watched her turn slowly, taking in her surroundings with an approving smile. I could not begin to guess what might be going through her mind. "You want to poke around some more?"

She looked back at me. "Oh, no. I've been having foot problems lately, and I don't think I'm up to much walking.

Besides, I have some e-mails to forward to my replacement at Corporate."

"Then I guess that's the whole tour," I said, reaching for the door handle. "So if--" A loud whistle from the mezzanine made me turn around. "Yes, Dr. Tannenbaum?"

The bulky man on the catwalk fronting the workrooms cupped his hands to his mouth. "Can you hit the opener, please? There's a truck outside waiting to load. I'll be right down."

Adjacent to the regular door, a tall one allowed trucks to back into the warehouse. I hit the palm-sized button beside it to make the sectional metal door roll upward. The truck backed part way in and stopped. The driver hopped out, handed me his clipboard, and jogged to the truck's rear to open it. I had just started looking at the paperwork when Tannenbaum reached us and snatched it from my hands.

"Thanks, Lindy," he huffed. "Whew! Those stairs always give me a workout."

I introduced Montana, and they launched into cataloging people they knew at Corporate. While I waited for them to finish, I turned to watch the forklift emerging from the shelves and got a nasty surprise.

It carried a pallet bearing a single item: a metal plate about six feet square with a four-foot hole in the middle. My imagination supplied an arrangement of sixteen such plates edge

to edge in a square. No giant stamping machine from space, but my unease only increased. Clearly, plates like this one had been used to create the holes in Chet's field.

Back at the administration building, Montana and I went to our separate offices, and I revised my theory in a way which would certainly interest Kerrigan. If I could supply a connection between the metal plate and Haggard's holes, it would suggest NuGreen was conducting experiments on other people's land without permission, a genuine crime. But I needed more evidence and, for maximum effect, a link to Romberg's mounds.

Knowing each other for almost a quarter century, Frankie and I had come to think along similar paths so often it was almost spooky. We must have been doing it then because my cell phone played its tune announcing a text message.

"Feel like shopping?" Frankie asked, code for wanting to talk about something serious and secret, formerly relating to police department politics.

"Up for that," I texted back. "Where?"

"The old fave," she sent back, meaning the McDonald's in the big regional shopping mall just over the county line.

"C U at noon fifteen." I then knocked on Montana's closed door before opening it.

She looked up from her computer with a start.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Didn't mean to scare you. I just made a date for lunch with a friend, but I then I thought I shouldn't just abandon you on your first day."

"Oh, no problem," she said lightly. "I bring my lunch. It's easier because of all my allergies."

"Maybe some other time," I concluded and walked away wondering what sort of allergies.

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I met Frankie at the appointed place where we took our trays to an outdoor table.

"Interesting pictures you sent," she said solemnly. "When Rupert saw them, he practically danced the fandango."

"Rupert? What kind of parent names a kid Rupert?"

"It's his last name, you twit." She blushed and stifled a smile. "And Mark is not as young as I thought. It's just all his boyish enthusiasm."

"Uh-oh. Do I detect interest, old pal?"

"He's not without potential. Anyway, he ran your employee roster against the national database and guess what. Every one of the pictures and every name came up a hit, but not as a match."

"Huh?"

"Original names and faces don't match. Just like we talked about, they're mixing them up, but most of your workers have names of people who disappeared long before Chet's holes."

"What did your little friend think about them?"

She studied me and chewed salad. "Well, he didn't outright laugh. Said it was interesting and he'd take a look."

"He might be more interested when I tell you what I found out this morning." I related my conversation with Chet and the delivery at the warehouse.

Her eyes widened. "Any idea what they're for?"

"You mean, what the company says they're for? No, but I intend to find out."

"How?"

"I'm security," I said smugly. "I can go anywhere I want."

"Be careful," Frankie said warily. "We got the makings of some serious stuff here."

"You hear from Spurgeon or Romberg?"

"Nope, but now I intend to call them this afternoon."

"Isn't it interesting how both properties border on NuGreen's campus?"

"Yeah, and I can't wait to see where exactly those mounds Dave saw are. Something tells me we're about to face another coincidence."

I headed back to the office with mixed feelings. On one hand, my theory about Chet's holes being created by something not of this earth seemed a trifle silly; on the other, my instincts had not failed me and pointed to suspect activity at NuGreen. At least I still had the knack.

As I told Frankie, I intended to get a better handle on NuGreen's secret operations and so drove straight to the lab building. I walked up to the door I had used earlier, but instead of swiping my badge, I just pulled on it. Locked, but within seconds, someone opened it from inside.

"Forget your badge?" the security guard asked.

"Security sweep," I told him. "Checking our locked-door policies are being followed."

His eyes narrowed. "I didn't hear anything about a security sweep."

"Orders from Corporate." I pushed past him. "Sure everything checks out great when we announce we're coming, but they want to know what happens when nobody's expecting it."

"Oh," he said resignedly. "Well, I guess." Then he grew wary again. "What do you want to see?"

"I know my way around," I told him. He did not take the hint, and I wondered if it signaled diligence or dullness. "I'm just doing my job. I actually have to write a report."

"They've got an experiment going in the environmental chamber," he warned, still suspicious. "You can't open that."

I shrugged. "I'm only interested in access points from outside."

He eased off doubtfully. "Well, all right then."

With my alibi for roaming around established, I proceeded down the aisle the forklift had emerged from earlier. Walking among twenty-foot high shelves, I got a shudder from the thought that someone could probably push a heavy object from them to eliminate a nosy woman by "accident." At the end of the row, I followed the wall to the farthest corner of the building.

I found the next link in the evidence chain near the large door to the outside: more metal plates leaned against the wall. On closer inspection, the nearest one had crumbs of dirt on one surface. Across the aisle stood a long line of wooden crates about eight feet tall. I walked along looking at them, but only found a barcode label and a NuGreen logo on each.

Near the end of the row, I found a crate with its front panel partially pulled free. I dug my fingers under the lower corner and opened it some more. Inside, what looked like a monster water heater almost filled the container, except it appeared to be made of clear glass or plastic filled with fluid the color of car antifreeze, a bilious yellow-green. I squeezed my hand through the gap to the surface which felt solid and a

bit greasy, and a finger flick returned a hollow thump. My theory came into focus.

The metal plates laid edge to edge in Haggard's field had formed a template for digging the holes while leaving no footprints around them. They probably used some kind of auger to speed up the job. The cylinders went into the holes; excess dirt hauled away. Whatever they were for, the elements involved appeared earthly and mundane, but instead of being relieved, my uneasiness increased.

As I pulled into my parking spot back at the administration building, some workers were removing the translucent panels from the lighted NuGreen sign by the road. I remembered Beecham mentioning the re-branding meeting at Corporate and figured a flashier logo would replace the old.

My next line of investigation required a review of all the information I could dig up on NuGreen. I did not find much, either in the files or on the internet, odd for a company which had grown rapidly in the last few years. From their roots as a small enterprise based in Hawaii, they now had almost two hundred installations in North America and more throughout the world. Nothing I read said what they were actually trying to do beyond "finding innovative solutions to environmental issues." Nothing hinted at a course of research which might explain the holes and cylinders.

After a couple of frustrating hours, I gave up and went to the kitchen for a break to find Montana brewing a cup of lemongrass tea.

"Did you have a nice lunch?" she asked.

"Sure, and you?"

"Yes, I--" She cocked her head to listen to a ringing phone. "I think that's mine." She hurried away.

I decided Montana's tea seemed like a good idea and fixed a cup of Earl Grey with a hefty squeeze of lemon juice. Then I used the restroom and grabbed the mug on the way out.

I sat at my desk, took a sip. Lemon tea, tons of sugar. I sprang to my feet. "Montana! Wrong cup!"

Just as I reached her door, she dropped the mug I had prepared. With a horrified expression, she charged past me, nearly staggering, bumping against the doorframe.

I turned and followed, barely glimpsing her disappearing into the bathroom before she slammed the door.

I stood next to it, pulse rate soaring. "Montana? Are you all right?"

Muffled gasping.

"Should I call the paramedics?"

Gagging, the sound of retching.

I did not know what to do, so I waited and fought against an urge to pace. Had she passed out? Was she in the grip of some

severe allergic reaction? Even though she might be part of something suspicious, human decency insisted I try to help. Seconds ticked by, and I grew more worried.

I knocked. "Montana?"

No answer.

I opened the door. "Are you--"

She slowly rose from her crouch in front of the toilet, lowering her skirt that she had been holding up. What I saw below her descending hem scared me more than anything I had ever seen in my life.

Behind her knees, a flat, semicircular shape, nearly transparent. Like cellophane with thin veins running through it. Just like the tip of a--

Shock and horror sent me stumbling backward with a strangled scream. Brain in a hard stall, I groped blindly and sat in the first chair I contacted, overwhelmed by dizziness. I put a hand to my clammy brow and leaned on the table, panting.

The tip of a wing. A dragonfly's wing, but huge. My mind would not accept what my eyes had seen.

"Lindy?"

I looked up at Montana on the other side of the table, her expression unreadable, sort of . . . inhuman. Although my mouth had gone as dry as the desert, I found my voice.

"What are you?"

"Please, let me explain," she said quietly. She perched on another chair opposite me. "There's no reason to be afraid."

I folded my trembling hands on the table, tried to squelch the roaring in my ears. Shock made it impossible to think about anything, even running away.

Montana reached over and placed her hand on my right forearm. I watched her do it, unable to react. It felt like anyone's hand, but it also acted on me like a heavy dose of tranquilizers. My mind went dull, sensory perceptions foggy.

"You must listen because I need your help," Montana said earnestly.

I could not look away from her almost black eyes. I did not want to do anything but listen to her voice, her words. Nothing else mattered.

"Thousands of years ago, my kind lived on a beautiful world of crystal waters and clear atmosphere and land which provided everything required for sustenance. They were equally well adapted to land or water and lived in harmonious peace with the world, a true part of it, free to pursue intellectual goals and develop their society.

"But then a cataclysmic event changed everything. A volcanic eruption of enormous scale brought near total devastation. The debris fouled our air and water and destroyed the food supply. Most of my kind perished, but a mere handful

managed to escape via space-going vessels which had been prepared for scientific expeditions. They hoped they could take refuge elsewhere and wait for the environment to recover."

Some part of my brain asked how I could simply accept whatever Montana said, but it was such a small part that the question was swept aside. I focused on her story as though my life depended on it.

"The survivors wandered from galaxy to galaxy for generations," she continued, a narrator reading a script. "They attempted to settle on different worlds, but none proved as secure and nurturing as their home. So they returned there, full of optimism, only to discover that in their absence, a pestilence had taken over. A lower species had thrived in the disrupted environment, like rats in the cities, living in filth, overbreeding, spreading disease. And they could not combat this infestation because the wanderers were outnumbered, having had to limit procreation while confined to their space vessels.

"Again they wandered, applying their intellects in a search for a way to evict the squatters. Eventually, my generation found a safe harbor of sorts, a place where we can increase our numbers enough to fight them."

Thick silence reigned as I studied her face which seemed to be at the other end of a tunnel. "Here," I finally said.

"Yes," Montana agreed. "We started living among you almost

thirty years ago, fewer than twenty of us. With our normal reproductive cycle, it would have taken a long time to grow our population to sufficient numbers. But then our scientists developed a method of cloning which greatly accelerated the process."

"The holes I saw," I said. I felt disconnected and remote, and thinking proved a complicated task almost beyond my capabilities. "And in the warehouse, I saw the plates and cylinders."

Montana showed no surprise. "The incubators for cloned cells are buried to keep them safe. The cylinders contain a nutrient substrate. As soon as the clones reach maturity, they emerge. When environmental consciousness became fashionable in pockets here, we established NuGreen to manage and protect the cloning project while functioning in the open."

It all made sense, perfect sense. I felt no fear, only awe. "Then is everyone here, at this site, like you?"

"Except for you, of course. Most of the workers, other than Tannenbaum and Beecham, are from the first round of cloning when the process was still in development. They are not very bright and, well, not fully equipped."

"You mean . . . wings?"

"Yes." Her face no longer struck me as inhuman, but warm and friendly. "NuGreen has installations all over the world, and

soon, we'll be ready to eradicate the vermin overrunning our world. You see, body for body, they are the same size, although we are naturally superior in physical power and intellect, but without sufficient numbers of us, we would be quickly overwhelmed. The first mass cloning cycle will complete tomorrow night, and the emerging clones will immediately reproduce in our normal way, increasing our population geometrically." Her hand tightened on my arm. "You surely understand the need for secrecy. Consider your own reaction and then imagine trying to explain what we are doing to others. We just need a little more time to achieve our goal, and we might not get it if too many become aware of our existence."

A surge of empathy washed over me. Safe harbor for a little time was all they were asking, and yes, secrecy was best. Let them have their chance for a home. "You said you needed my help. You mean keeping your presence secret?"

"Yes, but something else too. I was careless this afternoon in taking the wrong cup, and I am indebted to you for saving my life. Caffeine is poison to us, and another swallow would most likely have killed me, especially if I hadn't been able to expel the first one before it entered the bloodstream."

A thousand questions crowded into my head, wanting more details about Montana and her kind, about their physiology,

their culture, their home world, their ships. But Montana resumed speaking and the questions evaporated.

"Even so, my bodily functions have been affected, and I must now reproduce ahead of schedule." She followed my gaze when it dropped to her abdomen, then raised her head with a knowing smile. "We do not reproduce the way you do. Our method is much quicker."

"How can I help?" The question rolled off my tongue without thinking.

"Drive me to the lake. I must be near a body of water, both for myself and my progeny." She made a shy smile. "You may watch if you like."

My jaw dropped. I thought, what a tremendous opportunity. I alone shared her secret and would be the only human to witness the event. "Are you sure you want--"

"Don't be embarrassed," she encouraged. "It is a lovely procedure, very different from yours. You have the pleasure in the act of conception, followed by months of discomfort and nuisance leading up to the pain of birth. Our method is as pleasurable for us as sex is for you, and when it's done, two fully mature beings go about their lives."

Curious, even eager, I wondered why I felt frightened in the bathroom. Understanding had erased my fear. "When?"

"As soon as you feel up to driving."

The closed blinds on the lunchroom windows hid the sky from view, but the clock on the wall said ten after six. Where had the time gone? Montana's story had not taken hours, had it? My head still felt muddled.

"I'm up to it now," I said. I pushed back my chair and stood, wavering a moment on rubber-band legs.

"Are you sure?" Montana asked, gripping my shoulder. "You seem a little unsteady."

"No, I'm fine." I really wanted to go with her, to see, to understand. Whispers of other questions returned but once again vanished before I could voice them. The notion I might be dreaming struck me, but it seemed unimportant compared to helping Montana.

As I drove the golf cart to the lake, my hazy, mellow, sort of out-of-control feeling reminded me of the first and only time I tried smoking marijuana. I did not care for the sensation then, and I liked it even less now. In an effort to regain control, I thought to ask, "What do you call yourselves?"

"I'll tell you, but it's a sound the human tongue could never produce." She made her mouth a round "O" and emitted an ululating tone, like something from an electronic synthesizer.

Awed, I asked nothing more. I parked on the slope leading down to the lake, and Montana got out.

"Once the division is complete, my other and I will need to swim and drink a great deal of water. You don't have to wait for me. Feel free to leave whenever you wish."

Then she began disrobing.

She wore no stockings under her shoes, and when she took them off, I saw the reason for her awkward walking style. Instead of toes, each foot ended in a shallow point, rather like a sort of fin. She removed jacket, skirt, and blouse, folding each piece before piling it on the seat of the cart. No underwear. Completely naked, she walked to the water in a smooth, graceful stride.

I had been right about the wings being like those of a dragonfly. Seeing them protruding from her back brought about no particular alarm; instead, they seemed intensely beautiful. I sat on the grass by the cart, watching them sparkle and flash with iridescence in the lowering sun.

Montana walked onto the water, gliding over its surface. She turned to face me and extended both arms at her sides. Her body was pale and smooth, human but for the lack of breasts and genitalia, like a child's doll.

She closed her eyes and tilted her head back, smiling serenely. Slowly, the wings unfurled behind her shoulders, and my breath caught as they glistened with rainbow colors. Her white skin seemed to glow, the edges shimmering like a mirage.

I thought at first the fading light was playing tricks, but within seconds, it became clear her body was expanding, stretching from side to side. I stared transfixed, biting a knuckle against an urge to cry out.

A cleft appeared in the crown of her expanded head, and her eyes flew open. An expression of pure rapture washed over her stretched features, and a different warbling tone floated over the water like a sigh of ecstasy.

A powerful surge of hot wind smelling of sea water buffeted me, nearly knocked me over, followed by a wave of feeling, a joy so intense that for a moment, I thought I might pass out. When I recovered, I blinked hard and shook my head. Two Montanas now stood on the water.

Tears coursed down my cheeks, and my stomach quivered at a taste of blood on my tongue. My teeth had broken the skin of my knuckle.

Both figures faced each other, beatific smiles on their identical faces. With a flutter of gossamer wings, they rose ten feet in the air and hovered. One of them turned her head and winked at me before both plunged headlong into the water without leaving a ripple.

Overwhelmed, humbled, vacillating between terror and euphoria, I scrambled to my feet and ran through the twilight, right past the cart and on over undulating hills of perfect

lawn. How long had I been out there watching? What had happened to the time? My heart fluttered in my chest like the wings of two otherworldly creatures. I knew I had to hurry, to call Frankie and make her back off the investigation. The emergence must proceed on schedule so Montana and her kind could achieve their goal.

I collected my purse from the office and hustled into my car, too rattled to think about putting the top up. My shaking hands could barely handle the keys to start it, but finally I got underway, pulling up to the mouth of the parking lot just as the last light went out of the sky.

The completed new sign glowed to life, and I slammed on the brakes hard enough to kill the engine.

My trance ended in a moment of crystal clarity. Marvel died, freeing logical thinking to take over. Unasked questions assembled, the missing pieces fell into place, and the conclusion I reached brought a sense of mortal danger stronger than the one I experienced down in that hole last April.

With new urgency, I got the car started and hit the gas, making the tires squeal. The star-filled sky no longer disturbed me since I knew the danger had not been up there but here on the ground all along, all around me. I tried to drive normally, sanely, fearing they could somehow know what went on in my head.

Just to be on the safe side, I parked at my house and went inside to turn on the lights before sneaking out the back way. Ten minutes later, I stood outside Frankie's door. From within came the sound of her favorite workout video. I started knocking, softly but continuously.

"Hold your horses!" Frankie shouted from inside. Television turned off; sound of locks unlocking. She opened up, dressed in tank top and shorts, mopping perspiration from her face. "Lindy? What the hell?"

Relief flooded through me at the sight of my friend. "She almost had me, Frankie."

"What? Who?"

"Montana. She almost had me."

"Come in," she invited with a puzzled frown. "I've been calling all your phone numbers for hours. Where've you been?"

I shuffled into her tiny kitchen and sat at the table. "Brace yourself, old pal. This is wild."

I told her everything, watching astonishment and confusion combine on her face.

"I think she used some kind of mind control," I finished. "She knew I saw what I saw, so she invited me to watch her . . . divide. But when I left the office, the new sign came on. NuGreen Environmental Solutions. Restoring Our World." I could see her working it out but forged ahead to save time. "We're the

pestilence. We're the squatters they have to wipe out so they can have their world back."

"Yeah," she said, frowning. Her fingers drummed on the table as she assimilated. "Some of what she told you didn't make sense. Like if they didn't have room on their ships to increase their numbers, how would the same ships be able to take them all away. And she kind of side-stepped the issue of where the ships and their home planet is supposed to be."

"You believe me?" I held my breath.

"Of course I believe you," she chided. "I know you. You wouldn't be in the state you're in for nothing. But this is huge. We're going to be swarmed by these things in a matter of hours, and we're going to need help."

I let out the breath in relief. "What about your F.B.I. buddy?"

She shook her head. "He went on a trip to inspect other NuGreen sites for signs of holes."

"But he'll believe this, right?"

"I don't know. Right now he's working the stolen-identity illegal-worker theory." She went thoughtful for a minute. "Tell me what she told you again."

I repeated my tale with Frankie interrupting to tell me to skip some parts. Near the end, her expression brightened. "I've

got it. These clones are supposed to start emerging tomorrow night, right?"

"Right."

"So we set up a stakeout by Romberg's mounds. Sheriff Kerrigan's interested in Rupert's angle. I'll tell him you gave us a tip some more illegals will show up there and requisition a video camera for surveillance. We film them coming out. He'll have to pay attention to hard evidence."

Tension flowed out of me in a sudden rush, leaving me weak. "My Lord, what would I do without you?"

"I think we could both use a drink," she observed and went to the cupboard. "I haven't been able to raise Romberg, but Dave Spurgeon said he'd meet me in the morning to show me the mounds."

When she set the bottle of apricot brandy and two glasses on the table, I poured myself a generous shot with trembling hands. "Think something might have happened to Bob?"

Frankie took a drink too. "Let's not jump to conclusions. We'll take it one step at a time."

The brandy burned my throat but helped calm my nerves. "You don't know how grateful I am you believe me. I can hardly believe it myself."

Unasked, she poured again for both of us. "You know, I wondered at first why they chose Chet's farm and now Bob's, but

it suddenly makes sense. Both fields were fallow at the time, both near NuGreen's lake. Flat land already roughed up to hide any digging."

Amazed, I tossed back my second drink. "Those two and how many others?"

"It's late," she said after a weighty pause. "We should probably try to get some sleep. Could be a tough day ahead."

Still too rattled to consider spending the night alone at home, I settled in on Frankie's sofa. Even after the brandy, sleep came late and with difficulty. I woke before dawn and had coffee brewing when she emerged from her bedroom, yawning and stretching.

"Ooooh, I need some of that," she said. She brought out cream, sugar, cups and spoons, her expression thoughtful. "You know, I can't imagine getting through the day without coffee."

We breakfasted on toast spread with crunchy peanut butter and sliced bananas, comfort food harkening back to our college days. Once fed and after a shower, I felt resolute and feisty.

Frankie took her turn in the bathroom and then donned her uniform, and we got into her police cruiser to go out to Romberg's place.

Once we were underway, she asked, "Miss it?"

"Hell, yeah." I swallowed past a lump in my throat. "Funny how one slip of the tongue can change everything."

"Well, there might be a few people eating crow over that. Who knows? You might even get your old job back."

"Moot point if we don't save the human race."

She gave an appreciative whistle. "But doing it could be powerfully persuasive."

I shook my head, amused at how she jumped over the possibility and consequences of failure. "You were always better at it anyway. I mean, you always have a plan, no matter how bizarre the circumstances."

She flashed me a disgusted look. "We're a great team, old chum, and you know why? We complement each other. Your instincts and my tactics. Maybe I have the plan, but it's your fabulous nose for trouble that sniffs it out even when it's not obvious to anyone else."

Her praise touched me deeply, and I knew she knew it, so I did not have to say thanks. Instead, I opened my mouth to remark about our current bizarre circumstances when she abruptly slowed the car.

"There's Spurgeon's pickup."

My adrenaline started flowing faster as she pulled onto the shoulder to park behind the truck. "I wonder if Spurgeon rounded up Romberg."

"That your nose twitching?" she asked wryly.

"Big time."

"Then let's not rush in. We'll keep into the trees until we can see what's what."

A thick windbreak of trees and brush topped the slight rise separating Romberg's acreage from NuGreen's grass. We both had the presence of mind to open and close our doors softly before sneaking into it.

My breath caught at the sight of the field below. The mounds were clearly visible, uniform and perfect as Chet's holes had been, but instead of sixteen, there had to be closer to a hundred. Or more.

Frankie whipped out a palm-sized digital video recorder, sweeping it slowly to capture the full view.

From a distance, Dave Spurgeon and Bob Romberg approached, each carrying a shovel over his shoulder. Frankie started to wave to them, but movement to our left caught my peripheral vision and I grabbed her arm.

A dozen yards from us, Dr. Tannenbaum and one of the maintenance workers crested the rise and started down into the field.

"They're from NuGreen," I whispered to Frankie. "You still shooting this?"

"Absolutely, but let's get a little closer to hear what they say."

We crept deeper into cover and skulked along the hilltop, stopping near the gap Tannenbaum and friend had cut through. From our vantage, the voices were faint but audible.

"I'm telling you, you must not dig here," Tannenbaum said forcefully.

"My land," Romberg drawled. "I don't know what all this is, but I got a right to dig wherever I want on my property."

"We could always call the Sheriff's office," Dave added. "Have somebody official--"

Tannenbaum turned on Dave, reached out and placed his palm on Dave's chest. The maintenance guy did the same to Romberg. Both men crumpled to the ground like marionettes with severed strings.

"Take them back and freeze them," Tannenbaum ordered. "We'll use them for substrate in the next round of cloning."

"What if they're missed?"

"After tonight's emergence, it won't matter."

They each picked up a body by the belt, carrying it as though it weighed nothing.

Frankie tugged at my arm, signaling we should move. Once again, we sneaked through the brush and trees, back to the road.

"We're in big trouble," Frankie observed when we reached the car. "It's worse than we thought, and we don't have much time."

"There had to be more than a hundred mounds out there," I agreed. "And if each of one contains a body which divides--"

"Well, we can't let that happen." Her face looked a little pale, but her expression was grimly resolute. "We have to hold them off and spread the word at the same time."

Anxiety clutched at me. "But how? You just saw them kill with only a touch." I thought of Montana's hand on my arm the night before and shuddered.

"That's why it's so important for them to increase their numbers," Frankie agreed. "With enough of them, they can wipe out Fayette in a matter of hours, especially if they come at night when folks are asleep." She considered for a moment. "Did Montana give any hint of how often they can divide?"

"Not really. She just said the normal way was too slow." I realized I had been rubbing my arm and made myself stop. "What's the plan?"

"Well, first we've got to show this recording to Kerrigan. Maybe he can round up everyone at NuGreen for questioning or something and keep them out of our hair. I'm also going to send it to Rupert and maybe the local cable station."

"Or one of the internet video-sharing sites."

"Good idea. Then we have to make sure their big event doesn't go down tonight."

"And how do we do that?"

She smiled thinly. "Got a plan for that too."

#

After a couple of gut-wrenching hours under the baleful glare of Sheriff Kerrigan, we chalked up one victory. He called in every officer on the roster and a couple of standby deputies to go out to NuGreen and hold everyone for interrogation on the deaths of Romberg and Spurgeon. I could not be sure if he really understood or believed, but it did not matter as long as Frankie and I were free to move onto phase two.

Mark Rupert responded to the video Frankie sent to his smart phone by saying he would take steps. The local cable station thought we were kidding at first, but they became very eager to cover the police investigating murders at NuGreen. We did not have time to observe what might be happening on the web.

A trip to the warehouse club for supplies drew puzzled stares at the checkout line and took another couple of hours. Then we went to my house with plenty of time before nightfall. As we worked in the kitchen, I remembered what I had witnessed the night before and thought ahead to what would happen by the lake. It filled me with dread.

"You think we should stay and watch?" I asked.

Frankie let off the puree button on the blender and eyed me from across the table. "I for one want to make sure this is going to work since it was my idea."

"I think it'll work," I agreed, although it made me queasy. I pushed Pulse on the food processor. "It's just . . . what right do we have?"

"Excuse me?" she asked hotly, and stopped working for a lecture. "It's our survival, old chum. You, me, and everyone we know. That's what right we have."

I did not want to mention how neither of us had ever set out to kill an intelligent creature before. "Technically, they were here first."

"If you believe what Montana told you," Frankie amended pointedly. "Even if they were, they had a choice. They had ships to take them to other worlds while we've got nowhere else to go. But they wanted this one, and because they see us as rodents or something, they think it's okay to sneak back here and wipe us off the planet. We're looking at a prime case of do unto others before they do unto you."

I could not argue her point. "Seems a shame we can't learn from them. I mean, space travel and cloning and environmental stuff. They obviously meant to use their knowledge to clean things up after we were gone."

She considered for a moment. "They chose the sneak attack. If they're so effing superior, maybe when they see their plan isn't going to work, they'll decide it's time to negotiate a peaceful coexistence."

In late afternoon, we loaded the squad car and headed to Romberg's place to set up a camera. A motion sensor would start it when the clones emerged and transmit images to Frankie's cell phone. Then on to NuGreen's lake, the largest body of water close to Romberg's mounds.

Frankie rowed the inflatable raft as I dumped sacks pulverized pain reliever tablets into the water. "You want to switch places for a while?"

"Nah. We're almost done." Each time her oars dipped into the water, they mixed in what I had poured.

I shook out the last bag and grabbed the first of several gallon jugs filled with a potent energy drink. "This had better work."

"Montana told you herself even a small amount of caffeine is poison. When the clones come out, they'll reproduce and have to drink like she did. It'll work."

"It's kind of sad, in a way. They really are beautiful creatures."

"Yeah, and they'd kill you without batting an eyelash. Keep that in mind."

The sun was sliding toward the horizon when we stowed the raft and took cover in some trees a few yards from the squad car. Frankie had her video camera ready. We sat quietly and waited. Occasionally, my thoughts bumped up against the carnage

to come, but each time, I turned away from it, caught between hope our plan would work and hope it would not.

When Frankie's phone buzzed softly, I leaned closer to see its tiny screen.

She gave a low whistle. "They're coming out."

Only the mound nearest the camera showed up clearly. A plug of soil erupted from it followed by a spray of greenish fluid. My breath caught when, a few seconds later, a naked figure hauled itself out of the hole. It stood for a moment or two, head turning on its neck, and then headed toward the windbreak.

"They'll be coming over the ridge soon," Frankie husked.

Only minutes could have passed but each one felt like an hour. Finally, the first figure appeared on the ridge on the opposite side of the lake and came toward us. Frankie started her camera recording.

More figures followed, dozens of them. Male and female from the neck up, devoid of sex below. I heard Frankie gasp softly, "Dear God."

The first few stepped out onto the water and mimicked the pose Montana had taken the night before. Hundreds of wings sparkled in the orange-pink sunset.

Frankie breathed in short, hard cycles, and the camera shook in her hands. My heart pounded, and I could not move a muscle.

"Are we scared?" I whispered.

"Are you kidding? I'm practically peeing my pants."

When the last ones took up their positions, they began expanding and dividing. The hot, salty wind buffeted us, blowing back our hair and stinging our eyes. Their inhuman sighs combined into a discordant music, and the waves of their ecstasy flowed at us.

"Be ready to run," Frankie warned. She took her gun from its holster. "If they don't all dive at the same time, some might realize what's happening and come after us."

Imagination supplied an instant image of the two of us fleeing from a hoard of angry aliens, and I willed myself to my feet, wondering if I would be able to make my leaden legs move.

The multitude of creatures rose almost as one above the water, glowing, sparkling. I clenched both hands into fists when they arced over and plunged.

And shrieked. All the worst rock-concert feedback I ever heard multiplied a thousand times. I shouted and covered my ears, but the sound tore through my head and twanged every nerve. A shock wave of hot wind smelling of death and decay caught us both unprepared and blew us off our feet. Frankie fell against a tree and then lay unmoving.

The screaming from the lake continued, an alien wail of agony over thrashing and splashing as hundreds of bodies writhed.

I crawled over to check Frankie. Breathing, pulse steady, merely knocked out. She did not appear to be bleeding. I patted her cheeks. "Frankie. Come on, Frankie, wake up."

No response, but I kept trying. Instinct told me we were in danger if we stayed.

"Lindy."

The voice came from behind me, and I froze. I turned my head slowly and saw Montana approaching from the direction of Romberg's field. Instinctively, I grabbed Frankie's revolver, scrambled to my feet, and assumed firing stance.

"Don't come any closer!"

"I thought you were our ally," Montana said in a chilling voice. "I thought you understood."

"I understood what you told me." Angry vengeance overtook my fear. "But you kind of skated around some important details. Like there aren't any ships. This is the planet you came from, and we are the pests you have to exterminate."

She took another step. "You saved my life yesterday. By our own code, I cannot kill you, and I can still make a case to the others to spare you."

"Stay back." I had never shot anyone before or even taken aim at one. Did it count since she was not human? I worried for a moment her lack of concern was because a bullet would not kill her. "It didn't have to be this way."

"Of course it did," she replied. She stopped a few feet away. "The superior always rise above the inferior. That is the natural way of survival of the fittest."

"Hey, I took sociology. Nature is nature, but intelligent creatures overcome nature. So how can you justify destroying us all?"

Her face pinched into a sneer. "You kill each other for far less important reasons."

My mouth went completely dry, and it took supreme effort to keep my hands steady. "Okay, so we're not perfect, but we're learning. We're trying to change our ways and clean up our messes. You said you've been here thirty years, and yet you couldn't bring yourselves to offer friendship and cooperation. You had to have it all your way. Well, we're pretty good at survival, too. Like any other intelligent being, we will fight to survive, and we're fighting now."

Montana smiled indulgently and waved a hand to the increasingly quiet lake, the sea of bodies. "This is a minor setback. The clones are dispensable, and many more are emerging all over the planet. It's too late." She took a step forward.

"Don't! I will shoot if you come closer."

"Now, Lindy," she chided. "You've never shot anything in your life."

Surprise made me waver for a second. How did she know?

"You don't really want to kill me, do you? We're friends."

Her tone had changed to the soothing, calming one she used on me the day before. Her smile sent a flood of warmth washing over me, and my arms wanted to descend. It took every ounce of will I possessed to hold them steady.

"I'll protect you," she cajoled. "This can be our secret, yours and mine. None of the others need know."

Her voice soothed and lulled, working its magic in my head, its influence hard to resist.

Frankie started to move and groan, and Montana's gaze turned on her. As she took a step toward my friend, her words sank in. "Yours and mine."

I fired a warning shot into the air. "Leave her alone!"

Montana barely glanced at me. "The clones can absorb some memories of the substrate individual if it is put in the incubation tube alive."

A horrified sob wrenched from my throat, and I fired again, hitting Montana in the shoulder. She stopped and gave me a look of such intense hatred it shrivelled my soul; then she changed directions to come at me. The next bullet struck her in the

chest, and she staggered back, surprise replacing the fury as she looked down at the hole it created. Her eyes stayed locked on mine, her expression one of defeated contempt. With one more shot, she dropped to her knees and then collapsed.

I lowered the gun slowly and resumed breathing, watching her body for any sign of movement. Then a flood of remorse made my limbs go weak, and I sat down hard. I had heretofore only killed the occasional insect or spider. Then again, to Montana and her kind, Frankie and I were on that same level. I barely comprehended I had probably saved us both.

"Guess lead works as good as caffeine," Frankie remarked dully. She sat up, gingerly probing her scalp. "You saved my life. I owe you."

I scooted over to sit beside her, and we just stared numbly into the fading day for a time. All was quiet on the lake, the bodies still, a few wings catching the last rays of sunlight. The awful smell had diminished too. It hardly seemed real.

"Holy mackerel!"

We both twisted around at the male voice. A man in a suit worked his way to us from the road.

"Lindy Stetler, Mark Rupert," Frankie said, and then whispered, "Remember, I saw him first."

Slightly pudgy, sandy hair, blue eyes, high color in his cheeks. Not bad, and I thought, go get him Frankie.

"Reports are coming in from all over," Rupert told us breathlessly. "We got National Guard troops deployed to a lot of the NuGreen sights and detain those, those things when they came out of the ground. Unfortunately, there were a few pockets we couldn't cover in time. There were human casualties."

My stomach twisted. "A lot?"

"A few hundred. But it would have been many, many times more if not for you two."

"So what happens now?" Frankie questioned.

He smiled winningly. "Feed of your video made it to NuGreen Corporate in New York, and suddenly, all movement from the aliens ceased, like they all knew the jig was up and were waiting for instructions. The top execs asked for a peace conference at the United Nations immediately."

"Guess they're not so frigging superior after all," Frankie observed wryly. "At least it's over."

"Over? This is huge," Rupert enthused. "We're talking about living with intelligent aliens in our midst and knowing it. Do you realize the implications? The technological advancement? And the problems! Discrimination, possible rebellion, arguments about jurisdiction and leadership, redefining laws . . ."

I tuned him out and turned my attention to the bright light rising behind him from the direction of the road, followed by a number of figures moving toward us. As they got closer, I saw

cameras, microphones. The press had arrived. I thought of the ones last April who had hounded me into the statement which got me fired and pressed my lips together, determined to say nothing.

"I'm Terry Valentino from the Omaha cable news," said the first man to arrive. "I was told to ask for Officer Stetler."

Great, they remembered me. I stiffened my spine; I would not be the ringmaster for another circus. "I'm Lindy Stetler, but I'm not an officer anymore."

He frowned, puzzled. "But I just talked to Sheriff Kerrigan, and he specifically said Officer Stetler would give us the full story."

I stared at him, stunned and confused.

"Sounds like somebody just had a heaping helping of black birdies for dinner," Frankie quipped.

I pulled in a deep breath and relaxed into a smile as a TV camera took aim at me.

END