

The Culling

by Den Warren

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"You know Accura, you'd think that in the year 2216, garbage wouldn't stink anymore," Mark said.

Accura wasn't really paying attention. He saw a figure moving around in the early hours. He just shook his head in disapproval. A guy who was clearly a clone walked by them as they collected the garbage for the City. You could just tell a clone when you saw them. Clones were just too perfect looking. They did not have individualism or creativity. It was like they were trying to hide something sinister in all that perfection. Besides, why was this clone, or anyone else, out so early in the morning?

"Hey Mark," Accura said, under his breath, "maybe that guy over there will come over here and show us how dumping this crap is supposed to be done. I ought to say something to him."

Mark said, "No, Accura. Bad idea. You want to get in trouble with the Sensitivity Compliance Officers?"

"Well. . .I hate the SCOs and the clones. They can all just to take a flying. . ."

"Why? They never asked to be born? Just like you and me."

"Why hate them!?! They take all of the decent jobs! Because of them, none of us non-engineered are ever treated like anything other than like this freakin' garbage!" Accura slammed the aluminum garbage can into the side of the truck. Neighborhood dogs started barking. The can had a big gash in it. "What the hell?! You'd think we were the ones who were some kind of damn freaks or something!"

Mark said, "To the clones, we are some kind of freaks. The clones are raised to make things better, and we need the people. We don't have to do all of the high-stress work anymore. By the way, did you get the message on the PID last night about the clone recall by the UCA?"

The news had come over the Public Information Devices that the Universal Cloning Authority was going to cull one of their clone cultivar series. Each series could mean hundreds of healthy individuals would have to be exterminated. Those of the series who were being rejected, were only rejected because they had potential susceptibility to certain viral infections. This mass annihilation of humans was not unprecedented. In fact, it was not all that uncommon. But the UCA did not make a habit out of airing their dirty business in public, so it was

unusual that this information was being leaked to the public. The information probably was leaked by an anonymous concerned objector.

Clone adults were raised and conditioned to serve mankind. Since clones were created for the betterment of man, the common accepted thinking among clones, was that some of them must forfeit their lives for the betterment of humanity. The idea of terminating their lives was not thought of as apprehensible, but in fact, their duty. Obeying the UCA's operating procedures had become like a religion to the clones. Those of this most recently condemned, but yet to be culled series, were girls of about ten years old. About five hundred girls, all identical looking, shared the same DNA, and were considered deficient.

Now after a decade of "feeding them out", the children were scheduled to be culled. It was widely thought that these defective individuals would be rounded up from their private nurturing contractor, and pushed into a very large grinder, their young bodies to be processed into animal feed protein.

Mark said, "Don't you think that's horrible that they are making clones report to the UCA for extermination, just because they are susceptible to some disease they might never get anyhow?"

"You kill me," Accura said. "Do you really think the clones are making the world so perfect? Who is to say what is right or wrong? You know what your problem is? You are too nice."

"What's really wrong with being nice? Don't you feel a little sorry for those people?"

"Just because you are 'nice', does not mean you are 'good'. And no, those clones are just artificial. We are the real people. We do the work. We end up handling the problems, or at least living with the problems caused by their stupid ideas. We sweat and bleed and die. Don't you ever forget it. The clones should have never been given the vote. Now there are so many of them, they vote how they are told to vote, by the UCA, and never lose an election! The damn UCA has way too much power!"

Clones were given the right to vote in the Clone Suffrage Amendment to the Constitution, after a long campaign portraying the clones as a downtrodden minority.

Mark couldn't forget about Accura's comment about his excessive niceness, which, in those days, could be thought of as a derogatory slam. Mark wondered if he was really too nice? Should being too nice even be possible? Then he started fretting over the fact that he was being overly sensitive about the comment.

Mark did not hate his garbage disposal job, although the hours and working conditions were less than ideal. To be honest, he hated working with temperamental Accura with a passion. But the job did pay fairly well.

But what if he had the same opinion as Accura and didn't like slinging garbage cans? What if he hated getting up so early in the morning and smelling rotting garbage as much as Accura did his? He considered that he may one day get

tired of the dead-end job. "Okay Accura, I'll give it to you that it does seem a little unfair that you can't even apply for a better job."

"Seems unfair? You're not even scratching the surface, garbage man."

Mark said, "I don't care what you say. The clones don't have it so good. What do you think? Those recalled clones just show up to the UCA and show their ID and then all by themselves, just hop into the grinder?"

"I don't really care. The only reason they kill some of them is to make the rest of them look more valuable. Otherwise, why would they admit to the public that they turned out a bad batch? It's all politics. We really screwed up when we left the clones totally take over. As far as I am concerned, they can recall all of them."

Mark thought; That will never happen. The clones would always be around now. A huge segment of the population was now clones. Society was totally controlled by clones and would collapse if they were not around. There was no unified opposition among the poorly educated freely conceived individuals (FCI). Now many of the thoroughly indoctrinated, freely conceived individuals, even considered their own DNA to be "junk". This public opinion was a result of "top scholars", although FCIs themselves, were at the forefront of proclaiming FCI DNA to be junk. Oddly enough, those scholars did not fight their way to the front of the line to hop into the grinder.

After work, Mark went home to his podmates and asked the other men and women of his pod at the dinner table if he was too nice. They were sitting around the table. This time of day was the worst for Mark. He could just feel all of the bad chemistry that was going on among the pod members in the house. Mark thought that enjoining with a pod would be a liberating experience. Not tied down to one spouse, like the backwards old days. But all this freedom turned out to be slavery in disguise. A fellow podmate was always unhappy with him for whatever reason.

"Oh that is ridiculous", Sven said. "How can someone be too nice?"

"Yea," Sheila said, "That makes no sense. Don't be such a wimp."

"You worry too much," Torrie added. "Your dinner is going to get cold."

Mark thought; Great, now I am too nice and worry too much.

Bond just sat there eating his soup. The others in the pod were tired of him just freeloading off of them. Some of the podsters were contemplating getting a dispersal order placed on him, but it had to be a unanimous decision and Torrie was holding out. It had been two years since Bond had a job. Bond's contribution to the twenty third century quasi-family model, was that he was trying to change his work status to "totally disabled" so he could collect money from the government without working.

Mark hated his pod and wanted to leave. Mark thought; at least his pod had not produced any children. Most pods didn't produce children because having freely conceived children carried a stigma. Whether or not he was the biological parent, leaving a pod that had littered the planet with freely conceived children was

seen as even more careless and irresponsible. The societal expectation was that the pod would abort their mongrel, non-engineered children.

The worldwide birthrate had been declining for more than a century. About 150 years before, Japan had led the way in mass production of lab-grown humans. This was an attempt to keep their country from falling apart because of a shortage of people. The robotic and android projects were inadequate. So the focus was on biological solutions, but two main problems arose; Their lack of using available genetic engineering was seen as careless because of the future waste of medical resources. Also Japan made little provision for nurturing their crop of people who turned out to be of worse than subhuman in character and behavior. The UCA was formed to improve these practices, but even after so many generations of trial and error, they still had no solid answer for the character issue other than termination of individuals.

Mark had some faint memories of how his more traditional family seemed almost normal for a few of his earliest years as a child. His family fell apart after his father left his mother for the pod lifestyle, but even Mark's brief family experience was a lot better than the mess he was living in now during his adult life.

It was no accident that Mark's parents gave him a Christian name. They tried to give him an unheard of, post modern era Christian upbringing. There were no known examples for Mark's parents to reference their experience with Bible living. Mark's grandparents were not Christians, and his parents did not know any Christians. So Mark's parents didn't really know what they were doing. They kept looking at the Christian Bible on their PIDs but instead of receiving the Savior and personally changing spiritually, which is the main message of the Bible, they instead tried to follow a form of godliness.

Christianity was not banned anymore. But a hundred years earlier, Christianity took much of the blame by the agnostic authorities for all of the social ills the global citizens could imagine.

Also, the relentless violent Caliphate was such a world problem that the "Enlightened Ones", the ones who called all of the worldwide shots, decided it would be more fair and expedient just to ban all religions. But by now, much like the period of cannibalism, there was no need to ban something that all but a few radical extremists wanted to be involved with anymore. People were far too distracted by popular culture to give due consideration to something as deep as theology.

Now Mark was absorbed into this dysfunctional pod. If he left the pod, he would be financially ruined, since the others would likely get to keep all the possessions. Although he hated the podhouse and the pod, those who openly rejected the pod lifestyle were accused of being "haters" or "insane" on top of losing all their possessions.

Yet, there was a little ember of something going on deep within his consciousness. Mark wondered how could he think about his own petty situation when there were going to be hundreds of ten year olds sent to the grinder? In what universe could this mass extermination be acceptable? When did evil itself

become irrelevant? It was too horrible to be real. No one seemed to care. It was like, if you couldn't see them, then it supposedly didn't happen. If the clone children died, so what? They would just make more. Was the rest of society like Accura? Believing that the clones were some kind of synthetic humans who were "recyclable"?

The next day, Mark started his routine all over again. Early each morning, while the traffic was low, they were out picking up trash in some neighborhood of the city.

Accura was not one to talk in the morning, but he said, "Hey! Look over there! That guy going through that trash, throwing crap all over. That's that same guy. I bet he's a clone. I'm gonna go bust him." Accura started running down the street to get at the scavenger before his scavenging was detected.

Mark just stood there watching the scene. It was bound to play out this way sooner or later. Accura, who was a lot bigger than the scavenger pounced on the man who realized it too late. Then he started punching the unsuspecting forager in the face. You filthy clone! I'm gonna tear you a new one. . ." He slammed the clone's face into the sidewalk.

The clone was nearly knocked unconscious. But he was able to raise his arms and block the incessant onslaught. Wham! The much smaller, badly beaten hunter-gatherer landed a vicious unexpected blow onto Accura's face, jolting his head back. Accura was laid out with one punch. He fell back and his head hit with a "thud".

"Oh no!" Mark said, as he ran to the scene. He looked at Accura. "Hey! C'mon! Snap out of it!" Mark shook Accura and there was no response. Mark checked Accura's pulse. Nothing. "Are you kidding me?! He's. . .He's dead!" Either the punch or the fall onto the concrete had done in Accura.

"I didn't mean to. . ." Blood was running down his face.

"You killed my partner with one shot. You're a clone, right?"

"Um. . .yeah."

"Now you're gonna get culled, clonie. I'm reporting you."

"I didn't mean to. . ."

"Yea, I know, that's what you said already. You can't get away with hitting and killing humans like that."

The clone grabbed Mark by the front of his shirt. Their noses were almost touching. "I AM A HUMAN!"

"Okay, already. . .you can put me down now."

"No, you stupid garbage man! I was minding my own business, and this idiot attacked me! If you think I'm going to answer for his pointless death. . . you're just wrong!"

Mark couldn't believe the strength of the enraged clone. "Okay, okay."

The clone set Mark back down on his feet. "Why do you people hate us so much?"

"Umm. . .I guess I really don't hate you."

"Well, what did I do wrong?"

"Nothing. I guess I would have done the same thing. That is, if I had super strength."

"It's all his fault! It's not fair! You know I will end up being culled over this. They have been looking for me. The only thing I ever did wrong was try to do things my own way. They will make an example out of me for the other clones if they catch me."

Mark hung his head. He wondered what he would think about himself ten years from this moment. Was this all there was to life? Just to do your work and mind your own business, then quietly die off? Would he look back and see himself as a guilty non-involved bystander? What about honor? Virtue? Did he love his life so much that he would protect it, even at the cost of an unfair clone execution? Mark's decision was, "No!"

"Huh?" the clone said.

"I mean, no, you are not going to get culled. I am not going to let anyone cull you. You are a free man now. Your name is Accura."

"I don't get it."

"That's his name." Mark pointed at the lifeless body. "You will take the place of my partner, at least for now, and then we will both get out of this place. I am going to hide you, Okay, New Accura?"

"Accura 2.0?"

"Yea, Okay. Looks like you can fit into Accura's clothes."

"I. . .don't know what to say. I never thought an FCI would actually risk himself to help me. I don't understand."

"Maybe I don't either."

Accura 2.0 put on the fuchsia garbage collector colored jumpsuit. There was a lot of extra material hanging all over.

Mark said, "You seem to be taking off a few pounds, Accura."

Accura 2.0 held out some of the baggyness of his baggy suit and looked at it.

Mark said, "Let's put this body into the truck. Hurry up! Traffic's coming!"

They hastily hoisted Accura 1.0's stripped down body into the back of the truck. Mark pushed the big button and the compactor pushed the body in the truck and out of sight, while the early morning Transit Worm passed by. The Transit Worm was a hovercraft train used for public transportation.

Mark never knew it would feel so good to do something that he knew was right. He felt totally liberated, like a new man. He decided he was going to do more to help clones. Much more.

Then Mark said, "You know where that series is? The clone series that is going to get culled?"

"Why?"

"Because, Number Two, we're going to go rescue them."

"What? You can't go there. They have to be culled."

"Not this time. I ask again, can you get us there?"

"Us?"

"Yes, stupid. You killed my partner, now you have to fill in for him."

"No, I don't live there anymore, but I know I can find it, if you can get me the series number. It's a big place out in the country, away from all of the cities."

Mark asked, "So where do you live?"

"I live with a group of outlaw clones on a farm."

"So why is it against the law for you to live on the farm? What did you do?"

"It's not the farm. We're slaves. I have a girlfriend at the farm. Another clone. She's pregnant. She was supposed to be infertile, but. . .I don't know. If the UCA found her with an unauthorized pregnancy, they would haul her off. You people know nothing of what we go through. If I started to show symptoms of a viral infection, I would get hauled off. I'm not letting my woman get culled, so we took off. The UCA owns us. If we are caught after an escape, even once, they will just take us straight to the grinder. "

"I. . .I never thought of that. That is totally wrong. Sorry."

There was an awkward silence.

Mark asked Accura 2.0, "Hello?! How do we find the building the clone rejects are at?!"

"The buildings are numbered by clone series."

Mark pulled out his PID. "Looks like according to this article, we want building F34C. Get in."

"We can't go there."

"Why?! "

"Because. . . that is the female side."

"Look, I don't plan on asking permission to go into the female side, or permission to do anything. You people aren't much for initiative or imagination, are you? Now shut up and get in."

It started getting light out as they drove the garbage truck to the UCA campus. They started seeing some more traffic as people made their way to work.

Mark looked over his new friend and said, "Man! Accura sure did a number on your face." He handed 2.0 a filthy shop towel.

Accura 2.0 was touching his face lightly.

Mark said, "That is going to leave some scars."

"We'll get caught," 2.0 said.

"Maybe, but try to be a little more positive. You clones are raised for one job and you can't even conceive of doing anything but that. You gotta open up your mind a little. You know they need refuse service at the UCA too."

"You mean, garbage pickup?"

Mark said, "First we gotta get rid of this load. This looks like a good place." Checking to see if there was any traffic, Mark stopped the truck in the middle of a street. He got out and raised the compactor so he could dump the entire load. The back of the truck slowly raised up like a dump truck. Ton upon ton of compacted garbage tumbled out onto the street, leaving a thick wall of trash. He saw one of Accura 1.0's legs sticking out of the heap as the trash tumbled out, but decided at this point, he was "all in" and it really wouldn't matter if the body was found. Mark got back into the cab and pulled the truck forward, then he went to the back again so he could continue dumping. Accura 2.0 looked out at the rear view side mirror and couldn't believe what was going on.

A car came up behind the mountain of trash and stopped. There was not enough clearance on the road to get around the mess.

Mark casually hopped back in and pulled away. "So how far is this place?"

"About a four hour drive."

"We got plenty of gas. Maybe."

"What about enough gas to get back?"

"There may not be any gettin' back."

On the way to the UCA, Mark asked 2.0, so what's your real name?"

2.0 sighed. "I don't use it anymore, but my given name is Edgar 413 M12A".

"Wow. You don't look like an Edgar 413 to me. More like an Edgar 414."

"Yea, I get that a lot," Edgar said.

Mark smirked. "I didn't see that coming."

"Why? Are you surprised that I can make a joke?"

"Honestly. . .yes. So, how can you guys tell each other apart? And yes, you really do all look the same."

"Well, it really isn't as hard as you people make it out to be. We have variations in head shape, moles, freckles, eyebrow curl, hair whorl; stuff like that.

You just have to pay attention, but I understand our eyesight is quite a bit better than yours. To us, you people look wildly diverse."

"You mean, screwed up?"

"Honestly, yes. But beautiful."

"Huh?"

"There is beauty in imperfection. If I had traits of my own, I would be proud of them. Just so you know, to tell you the truth, you also seem a little dim witted and slow and not so agile. We have been meticulously engineered for generations to be superior in every way. You are just a random mashup of questionable traits."

"You might be right, but you still need your ass kicked."

Accura 2.0 Edgar 413 M12A said, "You know, you make no sense."

As they travelled and talked, Mark wondered why their worlds had to be so separate. Whether he, or anyone else liked it or not, the clones were there, so why continue to ponder whether the clones should be there?

Mark asked, "So, do you mind if a lower life form asks you a question?"

"Okay."

"Why were you looking for food in the trash?"

"I wasn't. I was looking for produce, so I could collect seeds for the farm we are trying to establish."

Mark asked, "You can do that? Grow plants from seeds, from grocery store produce?"

"Of course. Its open pollination. It's like the FCI, I has certain advantages."

Mark said, "So here you are, Mr. Genetic Perfection, looking for random discarded seeds to grow. Who woulda thought it?"

"We do what we have to."

They were getting close to their destination. Mark's heart started pounding.

They made it to the front gate of the UCA campus without getting picked up for the little littering incident back home. "Oh crapola! Edgar! That guy looks just like you! Cover your face!"

Edgar sat back in his seat so Mark blocked the guard's line of sight to him. Mark rolled down the window.

"Where you headed?" The guard said.

"Ummm. . ." Mark whacked Edgar on the leg.

"F34C," Edgar said under his breath.

Mark said, "I need to get to F34C right away."

"Oh, part of the cleanup, huh?" The guard circled the building on a map. Then he handed it to Mark. "Okay. You can see where we are now, and your building is over there."

"Got it. Thanks."

"Ah. . .One more thing, sir."

"Yes?" Mark thought; This can't be good.

"I need you to sign in."

"Sure, no problem. I just forgot. You know how us FCI are with our memories." Mark signed the book and drove in. He handed the map to Edgar who navigated around the enormous complex.

"Damn," Mark said, "It must be two miles back to this building. That was smooth, the way you backed up so he couldn't see you, I mean. Oh, crap! Again?!"

"I told you," Edgar said.

"Shut up. We'll be okay."

There was another fence within the compound. There was a female guard at the gate. There was a sign that read, "All unauthorized males going past this point will be auto-convicted of sexual crimes." Another sign said, "All Vehicles Photographed."

"It's the female section," Edgar said.

"I get that." Mark stopped and rolled down the window again. He told the guard, "We're here for the cleanup."

The guard sneered at them. She was rudely silent, but waved them on.

They passed row upon row of boring, plain looking, 3-D print constructed buildings. Mark thought it was a little weird that they saw no one outside of any of them.

"Turn right," Edgar said. "Right here."

"Here?" Mark said, slamming on the brakes.

"Recalculating," Edgar said, trying to sound like a synthetic voice.

"You're a riot," Mark said. He backed up and turned right. They passed by more four-story buildings and counted down the numbers on the front. "F34D, C, B, A, here we are." Mark couldn't believe he was there. "So what do we do next?"

"Go in and talk to them."

"What do you mean talk to them? They'll all want to flee for their lives, right?"

"I doubt it, but you could give that a try."

"Huh?"

Edgar motioned for Mark to go into the building.

"Oh no, Eddie boy, you're going too."

"Fine. I'll go too."

They walked into the front door. The entrance was a large room with tables and chairs that could seat hundreds of ten year-old girls at a time. There were about a hundred identical girls, identically dressed except for their name labels, chatting and studying and walking around. Many turned to stare at the two uninvited men.

There was a woman attendant sitting at a desk behind a counter. She looked identical to the woman guarding the entrance gate to the female side of the residences. She made a face when she obviously caught a whiff of their garbage smell. "May I help you?"

"Yes you may," Mark said. "We're here to pick up as many girls as possible, and take them away from here."

She became quite concerned and serious. "Excuse me, sir, but I wasn't informed of this."

"Well, here's the thing; I'm informing you right now."

She stood motionless for a couple of seconds. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"What? You don't understand that there are some people who object to you killing off hundreds of innocent children? Just sayin'."

"I'm afraid I'll have to report you. . ." She pulled out a com device.

Mark casually grabbed the com out of her hand and dropped it on the floor and stomped it with his foot. "No you're not."

The attendant said, "You'll never get away with this. There are cameras everywhere."

"Don't care. Edgar, is there an intercom here? I want to talk to all the girls in the building."

Edgar said, "Over by the counter."

The attendant tried to block Mark from using the microphone. Mark shoved her out of the way. The woman shrieked and ran out the front door. Many of the girls gave a collective gasp at the scene.

"Man, I wish I had a gun right now." Mark walked behind the desk. He saw the microphone off to the side of the chair. There was a "speaker" button on it. "ATTENTION. . .GIRLS. . .MY NAME IS MARK. I AM HERE TO RESCUE YOU. PLEASE REPORT TO THE FRONT DOOR."

No one moved. Some of them slowly moved toward Mark.

Mark said, "Are you ready to go?"

"What happened to your face?" one of the girls asked Edgar.

"It's multiple abrasions, and ecchymosis." Edgar said.

The girls backed up a step, shaking their heads.

Mark said, "Never mind him. He got a boo boo. What's wrong with you girls? You want to get made into sausage? C'mon! I'm here to take you away!"

"How do we know you're telling the truth?" one of the girls asked.

"Huh?"

"We don't trust anyone like you," another girl said.

"If we didn't care about you, we wouldn't be here. Don't you girls know that they are going to put you into a grinder?"

"That's a lie!" a few of them said. Another said, "No, the grinder is just a myth. To scare us to doing what they want." Yet another girl said, "You're just trying to control us." Many more girls who had heard Mark's announcement were looking to see what was going on.

Mark started to wonder why he was risking his life for the clonettes. Why did he have to plead with them to accept his invitation of salvation via the garbage truck? He got back on the paging system. "LOOK, GIRLS, IT SAYS RIGHT ON MY PID THAT EVERYONE IN THIS ENTIRE BUILDING IS GOING TO BE CULLED. DO YOU KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS? THEY ARE GOING TO THROW YOU ALL IN THE GRINDER LIKE A PIECE OF GARBAGE! NOW IF YOU WANT TO AVOID THAT, WHICH I HIGHLY RECOMMEND, THEN COME DOWN TO THE FRONT DOOR AND MY FRIEND AND I WILL TAKE YOU OUT OF HERE! FOLLOW ME AND LIVE!"

Some of the girls started yelling at Mark. "Anyone can write on a PID!" a girl said. "It's a lie!" "You're scaring us." "You're mean," "What's wrong with you?!" Many started crying. "There's no such grinder." Some of the girls were running back to their capsule dormitories. "The UCA will protect us!" "There's nothing wrong with us! The UCA would never cull us!" "You don't belong here!" "Get out!" "EEEEEEEE!"

Mark put his hands over his ears because of all of the shrill complaints.

One teary eyed girl came forward. "I want to go."

The other girls tried to pull her back. "Don't be stupid!" one said. "We're not going with them!"

"What if he is right?!" the brave girl said to the other girls while she stared at Mark. She had Julia 119 marked on her jumpsuit.

"If you go, you deserve to die!" one of the other Julias objected.

"119! I'll go with you!"

Julia 119 and Julia 338 hugged each other.

Then several more Julias came forward.

"We gotta get going!" Edgar said. "We're running out of time!"

"I know, I know."

"THIS IS YOUR LAST CHANCE. WE ARE LEAVING NOW. I KNOW YOU WILL REMEMBER THIS MOMENT AND WISH YOU WOULD HAVE CHOSEN TO COME WITH US. PLEASE. WE ARE LEAVING NOW."

Several more of the terrified girls moved next to Mark, who turned and went out the front door. Only the girls who wanted to escape followed him. Once they got outside, a couple of the girls took a look at the garbage truck and changed their minds, then went back into the building.

"Girls!" Mark shouted at those who changed their minds. Mark wished that the truck was more pretty, but it was the only way out for the girls.

"We gotta go! Right now!" Edgar pleaded.

Mark raised the hydraulic compactor to reveal a practically empty, but still stinky, all steel box. "Get in, girls, it won't hurt you. Come on! We'll help you! Hurry!"

Two by two the sobbing, trembling girls were loaded into the truck. Mark lowered the compactor gate and the girls cowered in fear. .

One of the girls stood there, but refused to get into the back.

"Get in the front!" Edgar told the girl. "Now!"

Mark and Edgar got into the truck with the girl and pulled away. Mark floored the pedal and the truck roared, struggling to get up to speed.

"Damn!" Mark said. "Why didn't more of them come with us?!"

Edgar said, "I'll be surprised if this place is not locked down already."

"Maybe that attendant really wanted us to escape, so she took her time reporting us."

"Yes, that is very possible," Edgar said.

The truck passed the Female section without incident, although the guard's face was frozen with confusion when she saw Edgar's familiar looking face passing by. Edgar waved at her.

The guard at the main gate was trying to pull the sturdy industrial strength fence shut when Mark laid on the horn. The guard dived out of the way as the truck crashed into the gate. The gate buckled as the truck jolted from the impact, but kept going. The girls in the back could be heard sliding around and screaming in the aftermath.

After they pulled away, and they took a deep breath, Mark said, "I don't know how far we can get with everyone and their cousin looking for a smashed up garbage truck."

Edgar said, "I forget; What's a cousin?"

"Not now. Where are we going, by the way?"

"Let's take these girls back to the farm," Edgar said.

"Okay. We'll give it our best shot. Take us only down the back country roads, Edgar."

Edgar shouted directions as they travelled. There was a lot of turns and stops.

It seemed that they had evaded the local police. They took their time going down less travelled back roads. They saw very few cars on the way.

"We are doing great," Mark said.

The Julia in the front seat kept asking Edgar questions. Although in the process of being educated, she had never been out of the compound. Both of the men were too busy to pay her any attention. Then she asked Mark, "Are you really going to save us?"

"I'm going to try."

"Thank you."

That was the first time that Mark got any indication that his self-sacrificial actions were being appreciated by anyone. No matter, it had to be done regardless of the consequences.

Mark played the radio in the truck to see if they made the news. Some of the channels had programming that was directed toward the clone market, which he skipped over. Then an amber alert came over the station that "Two pedophiles; an FCI named Mark, and an Edgar series clone, had kidnapped 12 girls from the UCA. The dangerous sexual offenders also killed a sanitation worker and stole a truck, and dumped tons of trash in the street. The outlaws were believed to be dangerous and a reward was offered for the capture of the men and the girls' safe return."

The Julia asked, "Who are they talking about?"

Mark shut off the radio. "That's too much racket."

Edgar said, "Listen! Hear that?"

"No. I'm not a clone, and I don't have clone hearing. What are you hearing?"

"It's definitely a helicopter," Edgar said.

"Son of a . . . Where?!"

"It's about two kilometers away."

Mark saw a woodlot up ahead to the side of the road. He sped up the truck then parked next to the woods. "Here! Let's get everyone out!"

They got out of the cab and helped all the girls out of the back. Clearly, the ride took its toll on some of them.

"Mark asked, "How far to the farm?"

"Not far."

While he was putting the gate back down, Mark said, "Edgar, take the girls. I'll divert the police."

"But. . ."

"Do it!"

One of the Julias pulled on Mark's arm. Mark crouched down to receive a kiss on the cheek. The other clones looked in amazement at the very non-clonelike actions of the Julia. The others came in for a hug.

"Girls! Thank you, but I gotta go right now, so you can get away!"

He hopped into the truck and sped away. The clones hid in the woodlot until nightfall. Although they were terrified, they made their way to the farm.

Back at the UCA, the culling went on as planned with all of the remaining F34A Julias. A new, younger batch of girls was moved into the building.

For a short while, Mark became one of the most wanted fugitives in the country. In spite of their best efforts in extracting information from unwilling witnesses, the authorities were unable to find out where the girls were going.

A short while after delivering the dozen Julias to the farm, Edgar realized that the scarring he took from the fight disfigured his face considerably, even after it healed. He grew some facial hair and put on some weight. He wasn't so Edgarish anymore.

Because Edgar 413 was a non-compliant fugitive, all the other Clones from the Edgar series were getting a vigorous shakedown from the Police. Some of the treatment was brutal.

Edgar found out on the street that some places of employment gave jobs to undocumented clones. It was risky, but Edgar was desperate to find a better way to raise more money to support the mob of Julias on the farm.

One of the places willing to hire clones for pay under the table was the contracting company that collected the garbage for the City. Because he no longer looked like the other Edgar series clones, Edgar 413 was able to blend back into society without detection under the name of Accura Edwards.

Accura became friends with his work partner named Corpus, who was opinionated about everything, including clones. Corpus made a lot of ignorant remarks about clones, but Accura left them all slide by to maintain secrecy.

Accura also made friends with some of the trash-shedding patrons on their routes. His favorite was Bailey. Bailey was not just polite, but truly kind hearted. Bailey walked his little dog in the early morning and always tried to engage conversation with Eddie and Corpus. It was pretty clear that Bailey was a lonely soul.

If they ran into each other in the morning, Bailey would say little provocative Christian things to Accura, like "Seek Him while He may be found," or "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou will be saved." He didn't really put any of it together in his mind.

One day, while on their route, the garbage men found a lot of Bailey's stuff at the curbside.

Corpus said, "Damn! Look at all this crap that old guy is throwing out!"

They stopped the truck and commenced to compacting the heap of boxes.

A man was taking more boxes from the house to the curb. "I was trying to get everything out here before you guys showed up."

Corpus said, "You gotta wait 'till next week now."

"Where's Bailey?" Eddie asked the man.

"Dad died."

"Oh no," Eddie said. "I really liked him. Sorry."

Bailey's son nodded.

Corpus continued to cuss and swear profusely at the added workload.

Eddie was picking up one of the boxes, when a maroon object slipped out of the box and on to the sidewalk. It was a book. Eddie picked it up and flipped it over to the front. "Holy Bible".

Corpus said, "You don't want that, Eddie. It will mess with your head, make you insane. Get rid of it."

Eddie was going to get rid of it, but for some reason, call it curiosity, or maybe a remembrance of Bailey, or whatever. He couldn't. After his partner turned away, Eddie hid the book under the seat of the truck.

THE END

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