

Dollar Signs

“Another bad day at Black Rock,” my dad used to say when asked about his job. For myself, today was just another potentially bad day behind my desk. Waiting for my newest client to show up, I brushed the lunch crumbs off my desk and glanced at the clock. She was seven minutes late. I hadn’t even met her and I was already annoyed.

At that precise moment, the door opened and Karla Kingston breezed into my office. Not what I expected at all. A real stunner with platinum-blond hair, a tall athletic body, and long legs clad in leopard-print leggings. I was expecting a “past her prime” socialite and instead found myself admiring a thirty-ish woman who could pass for a cover model. Suddenly I felt very nerdy in my navy blazer and perma-press khakis.

In what I hoped was a graceful move, I stood behind my desk to greet her. “Hello, Ms. Kingston. I’m Juliana Greene, financial detective,” I said, extending my right hand toward hers. I thought I had a firm grip, but hers was firmer. I motioned for her to sit in the client chair opposite my desk.

“Your attorney—Patricia Maxwell—sent you to me, I believe? Tell me what you need my help with, please,” I said in the smoothest sounding voice I could muster.

Ms. Kingston looked around my office, a tawdry place, I’m embarrassed to say. All dark mahogany paneling, musty books, and rusty file cabinets. But it had a real window that really opened whenever the flaky AC gave out.

She cleared her throat and began hesitantly. “Well, you already know that I’m getting a divorce from my husband, Wallace. Wallace Kingston. We have a number of jointly owned properties and Patricia thought you could help me with one of them.”

“Yes, that’s what she said in her email. I help my clients track down lost or hidden assets and straighten out ownership issues. That’s the financial detective part of my profession. I began my career as an actuary and still spend roughly half my time in that area, helping divorcing couples divide their retirement benefits and other financial assets equitably. That’s usually the reason I receive referrals from Patricia. It sounds like you have a different kind of problem, though. Is that correct?”

She nodded. “Yes, quite different. Most of the properties that Wallace and I own are commercial buildings. Office buildings, warehouses, and so forth. Wallace and I have agreed in principle to a division of everything. I’m quite satisfied with the share I’m getting, but I have a problem with some property out in Banks. Actually, it’s west of Banks.”

“I’m familiar with Banks. There’s not much west of there, is there? Farmland and then the Coast Range. Is it the appraised value that concerns you?”

She shook her platinum-blond head. “No, it’s not worth very much. Wallace didn’t want it and I agreed to take it, thinking I might stable my horses there. It’s about fifty acres of dormant farmland, with an old farmhouse, a barn, and an airplane hangar. There used to be a small airstrip, but it’s all overgrown now. What concerns me is I think someone is living there and Wallace says it hasn’t been rented in over a decade. Patricia refuses to investigate. Her time is too valuable, she says, so she referred me to you.”

Definitely sounded like the Patricia I knew. But I was intrigued anyway, even if I considered my time more valuable than Patricia obviously did.

“What makes you think there’s a squatter?” I asked.

“One of the neighbors called me a few months ago. Said he thought that a spy balloon had landed on my property. You remember all those rumors and news reports?”

I nodded. “Turned out to be nothing, right?”

“I’m not so sure now. I drove out there last week to check and something is definitely going on.”

I pretended to check my phone for appointments, even though I knew I didn’t have any more today. “My standard hourly rate is \$300 for investigations, if that is agreeable to you,” I said while flipping through blank digital pages.

Ms. Kingston nodded. “Yes, that sounds reasonable.”

“Looks like I’m free the rest of the afternoon, Ms. Kingston. Do you have time to show me the property today?”

“Please, call me Karla. Yes, I can take you there now. Or you can follow me in your car, if you prefer.”

I thought about my ratty ancient Pontiac. Karla would have an even lower impression of me if she saw my wheels. “Let’s take your car,” I suggested. “You can tell me more about the property on our way there.”

Karla had little additional information to share, but I did enjoy the thrill of riding in her red Lamborghini. So much controlled power under the hood, responsive to the slightest touch. I guessed Karla was keeping the car in the divorce settlement. And probably had a few more back in her garage.

After a thirty-minute drive outside the city, Karla exited the freeway at Banks, drove a few miles north, then a dozen miles west. Definitely on the edge of civilization. A long gravel driveway led to an old, dilapidated house hidden in the fir trees. It was impossible to determine what color the house used to be, buried now under layers of ivy and blackberry vines. No signs of life in the house, but there were signs of recent activity in the adjacent fields. A healthy crop of something was growing everywhere.

Karla nodded toward the greenery. “At first I thought someone was growing marijuana here, but that’s not what it is.”

“No, it’s not,” I agreed. I bent over and touched the leaves of one of the low-lying plants. “Not potatoes, either.” I gave a tug and pulled up a tuber. “Yams, maybe?” I ventured. “Do you have keys to the house and the outbuildings?”

“I have the house key. The barn and hangar don’t have locks.” She rummaged in her oversized Louis Vuitton for a key ring with a single brass key, which she handed to me. “I’ll let you go first. It’s kind of creepy.”

I had to admit, I was getting kind of creeped out, too. But I tried to display calm confidence. Like rooting around in dank, spooky houses was routine for me. Just another bad day at Black Rock.

The rusty, disused lock finally yielded to the key and allowed us inside. A foul stench of damp and mold welcomed me as I stepped over the threshold. The electricity was shut off, but thin daylight oozed reluctantly through dirt-crusting windows. A thick layer of dust covered the floor and the few furnishings the last tenant had left behind. I led the way from front room to a bare kitchen and a tiny bathroom in the rear. Karla stayed in the kitchen while I ventured up the staircase and checked the two bedrooms upstairs.

“Nothing up there except a lot of mouse droppings,” I observed when I returned to the kitchen. “Is there a cellar?” I asked.

Karla pointed to a narrow door that opened to the cellar steps. Holding my breath, I nudged the door open and shined my phone flashlight down the steps.

“I’m not going down, but I don’t see any signs that anyone has been down there in years. Let’s go check the barn and hangar, shall we?” I motioned for Karla to show me the way.

Once outside again, I breathed in a lungful of clean, fir-scented air to steady my nerves. The house was bad enough. I suspected the barn and hangar could be worse.

The hangar was slightly west of the house, the barn some distance northeast. We approached the hangar and I tried the door. Surprisingly, it slid open without much effort, like it had been oiled recently. My phone flashlight at the ready, I stood just outside the threshold, bracing myself for what might or might not be within. Karla stopped about twenty feet behind me, looking like she was ready to bolt toward the Lamborghini at any moment.

The hangar had no windows and no electricity, yet my flashlight was unnecessary. Something inside was generating a steady gleam of light. Something metallic and spherical, about twenty feet tall. Could this object account for the recent spy balloon sightings? Other than its spherical shape, it didn't resemble a balloon at all. How did it get here? And why was it inside Karla's hangar?

Silently, a ladder contraption emerged from the side of the sphere facing me. As I prepared to bolt toward the Lamborghini, too, three small creatures appeared on the ladder. They resembled small raccoons, but when they reached the concrete floor, they morphed into human shapes.

Without opening its mouth, the tallest of the three creatures greeted me with, "Howdy! Are you looking for us?"

How could I possibly answer that question? Neither "yes" nor "no" would be true.

I stammered, "Not really. I was hoping to not find anyone here."

"We're just visiting. We needed some supplies and thought this building was abandoned," the tallest one said, its mouth still motionless.

"Well, it's not abandoned. The owner is right here behind me." I turned around to introduce Karla, but she wasn't there. "She was right here. I'll go find her. But first I need to

know who you are and why you're on Ms. Kingston's property." I was feeling a little bolder now. If the creatures were going to harm me, they probably would have already done so.

The tallest creature responded, "We are visiting your planet from Galaxy Hyxtamekt. As I mentioned, we need some supplies and don't intend any harm. We plan to be here for just one growing season and then leave."

"How did you get here?" I guessed in the spherical object, but I didn't know what else to say.

"We came in our landing craft, after researching your planet and others in your galaxy to find the supply that we need."

The other two creatures nodded but remained silent.

"Why do you look human? At first you looked like raccoons."

The tallest one replied, "We are able to take on the appearance of the ambient life forms of any planet we visit. It's a very convenient ability. And we are able to use our internal synthesizers to convert our language to your language and back."

"Sounds very impressive. Do you have names? My name is Juliana," I offered.

"We don't use names in Galaxy Hyxtamekt. But for convenience, you can refer to us as Alpha, Beta, and Gamma."

"You are Alpha, I assume?"

"As you wish," Alpha responded.

"Do Beta and Gamma ever speak?"

"Only when necessary."

I tried to remember what Alpha had said about a growing season. "What is it you're growing in Ms. Kingston's fields?"

“I believe you call them yams. Except they are actually sweet potatoes. They are often confused.”

“And the yams are the supply that you need?” I asked. “Couldn’t you just buy them at Safeway instead of squatting on Ms. Kingston’s property?”

“We thought we would arouse less suspicion this way. In, out, bother no one.”

I considered this explanation and found it wanting. “Well, you bothered Ms. Kingston. She thought criminals were up to no good on her property. In fact, you should be paying her for the use of her land, assuming she lets you stay here at all. She has intentions of selling this valuable property for several million dollars and your presence is preventing her from doing so.” I made that part up, but it sounded perfectly reasonable.

Alpha looked toward Beta and Gamma. They seemed to reach some sort of agreement, soundlessly.

Alpha offered, “I think we can pay Ms. Kingston something. Shall we negotiate now?”

“Absolutely! Let me go find her,” I yelled back as I ran toward the Lamborghini. I hoped Karla hadn’t taken flight already.

Karla was locked inside her car, with a small pistol gripped in her right hand. She raised the pistol as I approached the car, but lowered it when she saw I was alone. Sexy woman with a gun and a Lamborghini. What else was Karla?

After she unlocked the car, I opened the passenger door and slid inside. “It’s okay, Karla. There are aliens in your hangar, but they don’t intend to harm you or anyone. They just want to finish growing their yam crop and take it back to their galaxy. They’re willing to pay you for the use of your land. How much do you want to ask?”

“What do they want the yams for?”

“Good question. I forgot to ask. But you can probably name your price.”

“If they’re aliens, what will they pay me with? Some kind of alien currency? Lot of good that will do me.”

I thought for a moment. “Maybe they have something better than money. Information or rare minerals. It doesn’t hurt to see what they can offer.”

Karla shrugged and stepped out of the car.

“Maybe put the pistol in your bag for now?” I suggested. “We’re negotiating, not engaging in armed warfare.”

“Have it your way, but if they lay a hand on either of us, it’s on you.”

“Fair enough. But try to keep an open mind.”

We had reached the hangar door. I half expected the hangar to be empty, but the glowing metallic sphere and my alien friends were waiting for us inside. This time, I stepped over the threshold, reached for Karla’s hand and drew her inside, too.

“Ms. Kingston, this is Alpha, Beta, and Gamma from the Galaxy Hyxtamekt. Ms. Kingston owns this property.”

Her eyes wide with disbelief, Karla clutched her Louis Vuitton as if her life depended on it. She nodded her head slightly toward each alien in turn.

“Alpha, you said you want to pay Ms. Kingston for the use of her land until the growing season is over. How will you pay Ms. Kingston? Do you have any Earth currency? Bitcoin, perhaps?” I suggested.

“I think we can offer something better than currency,” Alpha responded. “You see, we plan to extract from the yams a chemical that we need to produce an anti-aging drug. The drug works on species other than our own. I think you’ll find that it works on Earthlings. We can share the formula with Ms. Kingston, if she’s willing to allow us the use of her property in perpetuity.”

Dollar signs floated like snowflakes around my imagination. “Just a moment, please. I need to confer with my client,” I said as I pulled Karla outside the hangar door.

I cupped my hands around Karla’s ear and whispered, “I forgot to mention that I charge thirty percent of net profit for negotiations. Deal?”

Karla shrugged, which I took as an indication of agreement. There would be time later to cement the details in writing. I stepped back inside the hangar and waited for Karla to join me before proceeding.

“Ms. Kingston wants a little more information. What is the chemical that you need and how do you know it will work in your drug?” I asked.

Alpha produced a small vial, from where I couldn’t tell, as the creature had no pockets that I could see. “Here’s a sample of the drug we made from the first yams that we harvested. The chemical is called diosgenin. It does not occur naturally in Galaxy Hyxtamekt, but it is abundant in yams. Our scientists have been producing the drug, which is called Regeneron, for roughly one hundred Earth years. I’ve been using it myself for a decade now. An Earth decade, that is. It works by reversing tissue oxidization, a process your Earth scientists have been seeking, as well.”

“If you’ve been making it for so long, why do you need Earth yams? Where were you getting—what’s it called? Diosgeneron?”

“Diosgenin. We were able to procure small amounts from a nearby asteroid belt, but we over-harvested and the asteroids disintegrated.”

Karla pulled on my sleeve. “Don’t get too argumentative, Juliana. I’d like to make a deal, but not until the divorce is final. You understand, right?”

She was right, of course. She needed Wallace off the title before making any deal.

I addressed the group of aliens. “Gentlemen, or gentlepersons, I mean. Ms. Kingston and I need to postpone negotiations until we have the opportunity to have your sample tested. If it checks out, I think we can reach an amicable agreement to exchange a lease on Ms. Kingston’s land for the drug formula. It shouldn’t take too long, I imagine. Meanwhile, you can finish growing your current crop undisturbed.”

Alpha extended the vial toward me. “I will need a receipt, naturally.”

“Naturally,” I responded, as I accepted the precious vial. “Karla, do you have a piece of paper in your bag?” I asked.

Alpha continued, “If the drug does not work as expected on Earthlings, there are other forms of compensation we can offer. I believe you Earthlings are fond of diamonds, are you not?”

Images of dollar signs and diamonds swirled behind my retinas. Other images, too. Sleek office space in a tony high-rise with glittering views of Mt. Hood and the Willamette River. A mansion in the West Hills with an elevator and infinity pool. And, in the nine-car garage, my very own spanking-new Lamborghini.

As Karla drove me back to my hole of an office, I clutched the drug vial between two sweaty palms. There would be so much to do in the days ahead. First, find someone at the medical school who knew about anti-aging research and see how long testing would take. Then, as soon as Karla’s divorce was final, negotiate a down payment from the aliens. Meanwhile, figure out how to keep the aliens from being discovered. Maybe dressing them like farmers and giving them an old pick-up truck could help. Karla could let her Banks neighbors think that she’d hired some farmhands.

“Today wasn’t just another bad day at Black Rock,” I said aloud.

“What’s that?” Karla asked.

“Just something my dad used to say about going to work. *Bad Day at Black Rock*. It was the name of an old Western. But today was not that at all.”

Karla glanced sidelong at me and shook her head. “No, not an ordinary day. I’m not sure any of it was real,” she replied. “But you have the vial, so I guess it must be real.”

It would be a while before I could look for new office space, I figured. Meanwhile, I still needed to pay the rent on my dumpy office.

“Say, Karla. You wouldn’t happen to need help with your other properties, would you? Maybe renegotiating leases that are expiring or dealing with some difficult tenants or neighbors? Being a financial detective is exciting and all, but I think I should open myself up to more opportunities.”

Karla looked at me again and smiled.