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—*New York Times* bestselling author Steve Berry

ERIN BROCKOVICH

WITH CJ LYONS

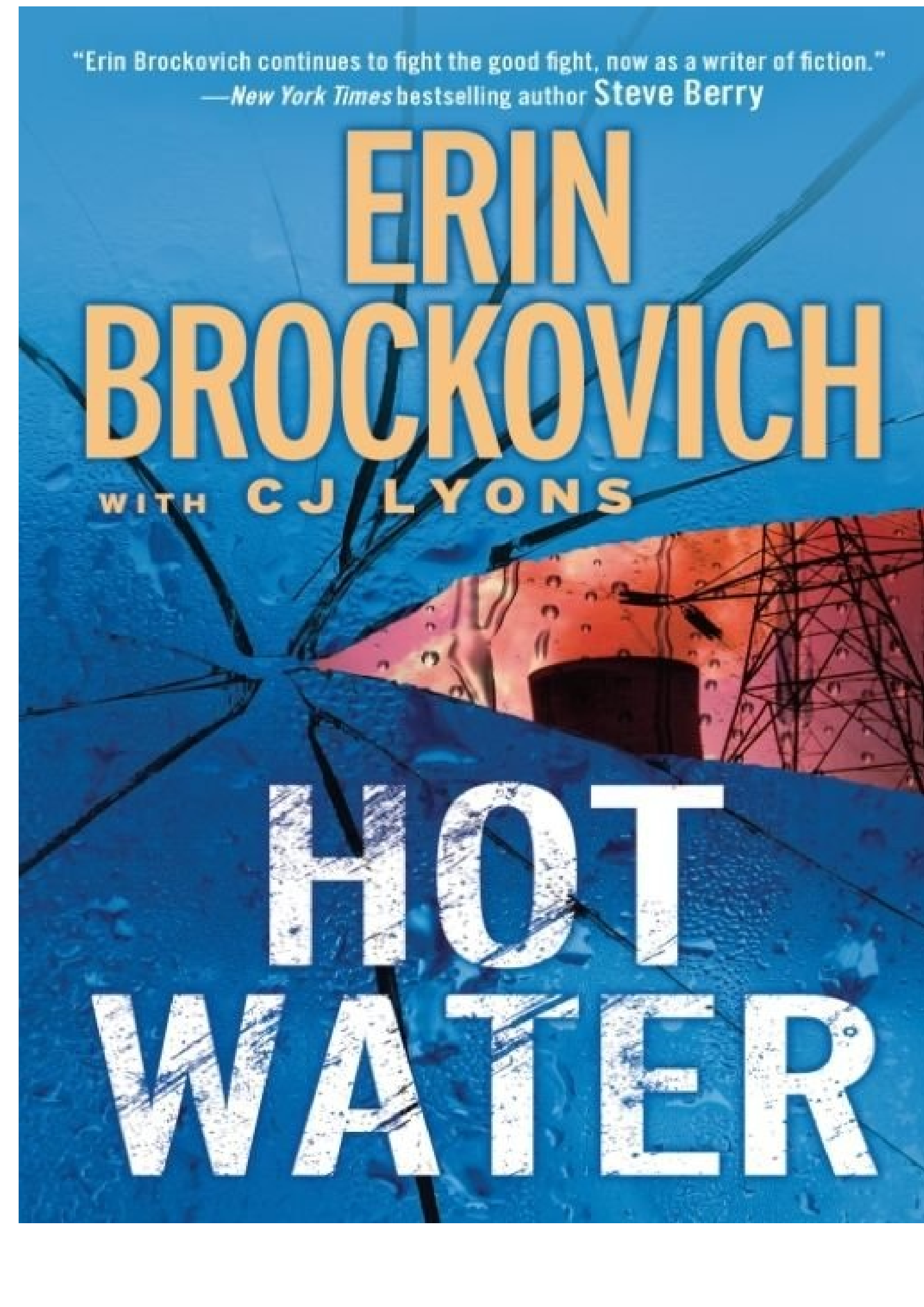
The background of the cover is a vibrant blue with a network of dark, cracked lines radiating from a central point. In the upper right, a stylized illustration of a water tower is visible, featuring a human-like face with eyes and a mouth, rendered in shades of orange, red, and pink. The tower's structure is a complex lattice of black lines.

**HOT
WATER**

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HOT WATER

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HOT
WATER
A NOVEL



Vanguard Press

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Praise for Rock Bottom

“Everything a great thriller should be—action-packed, authentic, and intense.”

—#1 New York Times bestselling author Lee Child

“A compelling new voice in thriller writing. Rock Bottom will keep you in its spell from beginning to end. And I love how the characters come alive on every page.”

—New York Times bestselling author Jeffery Deaver

“Erin Brockovich continues to fight the good fight, now as a writer of fiction. Rock Bottom is a story Erin Brockovich lived. The heroine is brilliant and feisty. Tension and turmoil mount in a high stakes adventure with dire consequences. Nobody could tell this story better.”

—New York Times bestselling author Steve Berry

“With strong character development and a fast-paced plot, this excellent first novel leaves readers anticipating further exciting adventures with AJ Palladino.”

—Library Journal

“Readers will love AJ Palladino and her son, a bright, precocious nine-year-old with a crippling disability he uses to his advantage. With highly engaging characters, heart-stopping scenes and a sensitive topic, Rock Bottom is one great rollercoaster ride that will not be stopping anytime soon.”

—Book Reporter

“Activist Brockovich teams up with bestseller Lyons on a fascinating and intense thriller about relationships, environmentalism and the lengths people will go to protect a secret. The story is fast-paced, dark and dangerous.”

—Romantic Times Book Reviews, Top Pick Designation, 4½ stars

“This is a character-driven, environmental-family drama that grips the audience from the opening gunshot until the final confrontation. With several tense subplots that tie together into a powerful taut thriller, fans will demand more similar tales from Erin Brockovich.”

“Rock Bottom is an intense, emotional thriller of a debut. From the moment the first page is read, the story catapults the reader into a world of greed, subterfuge, and passion. Brockovich has created a compassionate, endearing fire-cracker of a heroine in Rock Bottom. To elevate this massively engaging novel, the story climbs the edge of intensity with unwavering precision. Concise language, mastery of dialogue and a surprisingly authentic love story emerge as the reader becomes entranced in the pages of this killer debut.”

—National Examiner

Also by Erin Brockovich

Rock Bottom

We dedicate this book to the victims of
the 2011 Japanese earthquake and tsunami as well as
the hard-working and self-sacrificing rescue workers
who came to their aid during their time of need.

He who has a mind to meddle must have a heart to help.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Dear Reader,

Thanks for joining AJ on another adventure!

Turns out that nuclear energy is a touchy subject to research. When we interviewed several experts in the field we stressed that we did not want to use any scenarios that could potentially happen in real life—after all, our job is to entertain and explore new ideas through our stories, not to empower potential terrorists.

Unfortunately, writers sometimes have too-good imaginations. We discovered that our scenarios actually could happen—and in two cases they were things that the experts had never considered before (nuclear engineers not being prone to thinking like devious, cunning thriller writers).

So instead of setting *Hot Water* in a conventional nuclear facility we created an unconventional, fictional design that is a hybrid of several experimental reactors in Sweden, France, and Russia as well as emerging technology in “micro reactors” from Oregon State University. However, for our contamination breaches we did use real-life contamination events that occurred in the past and have already been well documented in the public media.

The medical isotope shortage is also real. Currently the needs of patients in the United States are being met from the Chalk River facility in Canada, but it is scheduled for closure in a few years. Chalk River has been closed several times in the past, forcing the United States to rely on the Maria reactor in Poland for its isotopes. New methods of isotope production are being tested in the hopes of resolving this crisis.

We’d like to thank our nuclear experts (who declined to be named) for their patience—and we apologize for any gray hairs we caused with our wild imaginations. The men and women who work in the nuclear field have our respect and admiration for their profound attention to the public’s safety.

Thanks also to our technical advisors, Bob Bedard and Melody Von Smith, to Toni McGee Causey for sharing her alligator wrestling expertise, and to Rebecca Forster for her help in researching the child welfare statutes as well as the amount of power and variability in interpreting those statutes that a judge could potentially wield. We also drew upon the knowledge and experience of several law enforcement officers from the Crimescene Writers loop, including Wally Lincoln, Kathy Bennett, Steven Brown, Robin Burcell, and MA Taylor.

As always, we very much appreciate the efforts of our publishing team at Vanguard Press/The Perseus Books Group, including Roger Cooper and Georgina Levitt; our editor, Kevin Smith; as well as our agents, Mel Berger (Erin) and Barbara Poelle (CJ), and our first readers, Kendel Flaum and Carolyn Males.

We’d love to hear from you! You can contact us through www.CJLyons.net.

Thanks for reading!
Erin and CJ

ONE

Summer in the mountains of West Virginia has a magic of its own, like a fairy tale come true. For me, it was a fairy tale paid for with blood.

It was August. After five months back home in Scotia (population 864) I'd just about gotten used to folks looking away from me and mumbling about how I'd gotten the man I loved killed and almost got my dad and son killed and just about drowned the entire valley in toxic sludge.

"That's AJ Palladino," they'd say, crossing to the other side of the street as I passed, in case I rubbed off on them. "Yeah, that AJ Palladino."

I ignored them. Didn't much care what people said about me as long as they didn't take it out on my nine-year-old, David. And, I have to admit, Scotia did treat David like the hero his dad had once been. They embraced him despite his two disabilities (or abilities, depending on your point of view): having cerebral palsy, which left him mostly wheelchair-bound, and being a genius.

Despite the town's acceptance of him, David still wasn't so sure about Scotia. He was hit hard by the death of his dad. I tried everything, even enrolled him in some online courses. Stuff I didn't understand but he was interested in, like the Phonology of Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphics and Einstein, Oppenheimer, Feynman: Physics in the 20th Century. He'd bury himself in them, working like a fever, finishing a semester's worth of material in a few weeks, and then would promptly slide back into boredom and despair.

Given my family's tendency for obsessions—addictions, really, holding on too hard, too long—I was more than a bit worried.

My friend Ty Stillwater, a sheriff's deputy K-9 officer, and his partner, Nikki, a beautiful Belgium Malinois, finally broke David free from his mourning.

Ty somehow found a way to make wheelchair accessible every mountain adventure that a boy could love. He and David would leave at first light and show up again for dinner at my gram's kitchen covered in battle scars. Once, Ty took David rafting down the New River, and they came back half-drowned, sunburned, and sporting matching black eyes that they refused to tell us how they got. They would burst into laughter every time they caught sight of each other.

I loved hearing David laugh but couldn't help but worry each time he left. For too many years I'd raised David alone, and it was difficult getting used to sharing him with others who loved him as much as I did. Not to mention the fact that I was and am a total control freak, especially about David. But I suffered in silence—David hates it when I try to rein in his independence.

Besides, I was busy enough with work to take my mind mostly off David—scrapes and bruises and poison ivy. My new business partner, Elizabeth Hardy, the legal half of our consumer advocacy firm, turned out to have a gift for negotiation, so our first few cases ended quickly and happily for our clients and were profitable for us. All in all, summer felt enchanted, magical.

Even the weather cooperated. The storm clouds that gathered every afternoon remained empty threats. They'd scowl down at Scotia, then scurry away to dump their rain elsewhere.

But sooner or later, the storm has to break and you're going to get soaked. Which was how I came to be yelling at the man in the Armani suit.



I knew it was an Armani suit because I'd dealt with enough of them when I worked in D.C. Not sure how they did it, but it seemed as if every suit jacket had an attitude sewn into the lining: money can buy anything.

Well, it wasn't buying me.

Elizabeth and I hadn't risked everything—including our lives—to start the advocacy firm just to be dictated to by a guy who happened to have enough money to indulge his taste in designer suits.

Armani guy's name was Owen Grandel, and he'd flown all the way up from South Carolina to consult with Elizabeth and me. He was in his late thirties, trim in that personal-trainer executive way, with a shaved head that focused your attention on his dark eyes and spray-tan complexion.

He had not come to Scotia to be abused. Or so his expression informed me without bothering with words.

"We aren't in the business of whitewashing a corporation's dirty laundry," I continued, in the mood for a fight and quite happy that Grandel was obliging.

He said nothing. Simply crossed his arms over his chest, leaned his shoulder back, and smiled. The kind of smile you give a precocious kid who's acting out and you're tolerating his behavior just because you know how wrong he is.

David hates it when I smile at him that way.

Thankfully Elizabeth stepped between us before I tried to wipe that smile off Grandel's face. We were in the living room of her house—which doubled as our office space—and she had just brought coffee on a tray. "I'm sorry, Mr. Grandel, we're out of cream. Will milk do?"

I rolled my eyes as she almost curtsied. Then, while Grandel busied himself mixing and stirring his coffee, finally taking a seat in the Queen Anne chair beside the fireplace, Elizabeth glanced over her shoulder at me with a glare that could have sparked tinder.

Play nice, she mouthed at me, as if I were the one making trouble. She sat down across from Grandel, smoothing her skirt and crossing her ankles like a lady before reaching for her own cup of coffee.

This is why I usually let Elizabeth handle the suits. I'm more of a field person—get me out there with the regular folks and I'll get to the truth of what's what and who's who and figure out a way to fix things. Then it's up to Elizabeth to cross the legal "t's," negotiate a workable solution for all parties, and collect our paycheck.

So far it's been a pretty good system. Until today.

"I'm not sure that you understand exactly what we do, Mr. Grandel." Elizabeth leaned across the table to snag a sugar cube, her sleeve brushing against his knee.

I barely contained my snort. It was very obvious Grandel didn't understand anything except what his money could buy.

"Oh, but I do, Ms. Hardy." He leaned back and crossed his legs, watching her through half-shut eyes.

When I worked in D.C., I knew men like him. Smooth, charming. Sociopathic. Women would fall all over themselves to do whatever they wanted. Poor sod, he had no idea who he was up against. Elizabeth wasn't like that.

"Which is why I'm willing to pay extra. Above your customary fee schedule." With an elegant flourish of his manicured fingers, he slid a check from his pocket and placed it in front of her.

Elizabeth has a pretty good poker face, but I could tell the amount on the check rocked her. She took a sip of coffee and set her cup down beside the check, ignoring it.

"That's half," he persisted when she didn't leap at his offer. "You get the same when you finish."

"And who decides when the job is finished?"

I stepped forward, unwilling to believe she was even considering. She glared at me and I froze.

"You do, of course." His voice was a low bedroom purr.

Her mouth twisted as she considered. Then she stood in one graceful movement, taking the check with her. "We need to consult about this."

"Of course," he said with a gracious wave of his hand, as if it were his house, not hers. "Take all the time you need."

I know my mouth dropped open because I felt it snap shut again when she took my arm and dragged me out of the room and across the hall to our shared office in what used to be the dining room. She closed the door behind us, then sagged back against it.

"Holy shit, AJ."

The check dropped from her fingers, flitting through the air on the sultry August breeze wafting in through the open windows, and curled up on the hardwood floor, face down. I picked it up, turned it over.

My face went cold as I read the amount. Counted the zeroes. Five of them. My mind did a back flip—no, that figure couldn't be right—then sloshed right side up as I looked again.

Half a million dollars. Which meant a million for the entire job if we took it.

Enough to send David to any college he wanted, to bankroll our company for the next decade, to be able to work on projects that really mattered. Freedom, security, opportunity.

All I'd have to do was betray everything I believed in and let myself be bought.

TWO

Elizabeth liked feeling the solid oak door at her back. It reassured her that this wasn't a dream. Made her feel as if her father and his father and all the generations of Hardys who had lived here in this house stood behind her, ready to support her even if she might be making the wrong choice.

She knew as soon as she'd heard Grandel's pitch that he would be hard to say no to, but a million dollars? For what basically amounted to a public relations stunt?

Small change to a man like Grandel, but for her and AJ. . . . The lace curtains fluttered at the windows and she inhaled the crisp mountain air. So very different from hazy, hot, and humid Philly, where even eight stories up in an air-conditioned fortress of a law office the heat still weighed you down. The thermometer told her it was almost as hot here in Scotia, eighty-two in the shade, but somehow it didn't feel so bad. Her house here didn't even have air conditioning; the breeze took care of that.

"We can't do it." AJ didn't sound so certain as she stared at Grandel's check. Elizabeth knew she was thinking of everything that money could buy for David. Unlike Elizabeth, AJ had never had money. Elizabeth wasn't sure if that made the decision easier or more difficult.

"Why not?" Elizabeth asked, squaring herself for a battle. Even though the house was paid for, she hadn't been able to sell her condo in Philly, and their cases so far had barely covered the mortgage she owed. "I'm tired of counting pennies and thinking twice about everything I want to buy. If that makes me shallow, so be it. But damn it, I didn't leave my entire life behind to come here and constantly worry. I thought we were meant to be making a difference, changing the world one case at a time, isn't that what you said?"

AJ looked surprised. "Isn't that what we're doing? We've been getting paid—" "Two thousand from Reverend Morley's church. Didn't even cover the lab costs of testing their groundwater. And the eleven thousand from Energy Alternative went straight to pay you and cover our expenses."

"I thought we were splitting the profits," AJ murmured, grinding the toe of her cowboy boot into the floor.

Whoops. Even though both of their names were on the office door—capitalizing on AJ's reputation as an environmental activist—Elizabeth was in charge of the finances. "There haven't been any profits to split. Not yet. That's okay, it's how any business is when it starts up. And my dad's life insurance is covering things so far. But—"

AJ jerked her chin up at that, face flushed with wounded pride. "No. We're partners. You shouldn't be paying me and not yourself."

"I don't have a kid. And a grandmother who needs my help. Not to mention your family . . ." Elizabeth stopped. AJ's parents were a sore subject, one they usual

avoided—just as AJ did her best to avoid them in person. It was a fine juggling act since AJ's son, David, wanted to get to know his family, even the crazy side of the family. Elizabeth had no idea how AJ managed everything, but somehow she did. But it took its toll on her, and Elizabeth could see it.

Thank goodness Elizabeth and her ex, Hunter, had never had children. She couldn't imagine how warped they'd be, caught in the middle of Hunter's narcissistic infidelities and her escaping him by fleeing to the office and indulging in over-working. No kid deserved that.

"How could we?" AJ finally ventured, staring at the check once more. "I mean what he's asking—we don't have any experience with that kind of thing. He needs a PR specialist, not an advocacy firm. Besides, we're supposed to be working for the people, not the corporations."

"Tell you what. How about if we go back and listen to him—really listen. Not interrupting to debate the environmental impact of nuclear waste."

"But he—"

"I know you don't like him." AJ was prone to making snap judgments about people—something she said she was working hard to change.

"I never said that—"

"Face it, AJ, you're a reverse-snob."

"I like you, don't I?"

"Not at first. At first you thought I was just another stuck-up lawyer out to make a buck."

That coaxed a smile from her. "Maybe."

"You decided the same thing about Grandel as soon as he walked in with his Armani suit and two-thousand-dollar shoes. How about if we give him the benefit of the doubt and listen without judging? Then we can decide. Together." Elizabeth pulled the door open. "Sound like a plan, partner?"

AJ rolled her eyes but plastered on a smile and strode back out to where Grandel waited.

"We're willing to listen." Elizabeth leaned against the mantel, looking down at Grandel, giving him her best hard-assed negotiator look.

Grandel didn't blink. His smile was slow and wide, as if she and AJ had already agreed. "Look. We're all adults here," he began. "We know that if we put A Palladino's name and face on an environmental problem, people are going to understand that we're taking it seriously."

"I don't care how much money you're offering," AJ said, pacing on the other side of the coffee table, her boot heels clacking against the oak floor. "I'm not a P shill."

"Not asking you to be one. I could hire a good PR firm at half the price. But I need more than good press. I need the community to publicly support me."

"But your problem is with possible radiation leaks from your plant. I don't know anything about investigating that kind of environmental contamination."

"Got plenty of investigators. Between the NRC, the Department of Energy, and my own group, the investigators are tripping over themselves. What I need is someone who will talk to the community—someone who speaks their language."

not scientific mumbo-jumbo about microsieverts and isotope degradation.”

AJ nodded, shoving her hands into the back pockets of her jeans and rocking on her heels. Slowing down long enough to think about it.

“I don’t need you to solve the plant’s problems. I need someone to interface with the community.”

Elizabeth swallowed a chuckle when AJ’s eyebrow tweaked at “interface.”

Grandel was smart enough to notice and hurried on, “Someone folks can trust. If you say everything is being done, they’ll believe you. If you say that it’s safe, they’ll trust you.”

“Mitigation,” AJ said. “That’s what the lawyers call it.”

Grandel shrugged and didn’t look abashed. Instead he met AJ’s gaze head on. “I’ll be honest with you. That’s exactly what I need. Mitigation. To reduce the impact these accidents have had. Someone to get the public off my back long enough for us to get up and running at full capacity. My company’s future depends on this plant’s success. I’m putting everything I have on the line here.”

AJ tensed up, began pacing again, and Elizabeth was certain he’d lost her.

But then Grandel continued, “Remember, Colleton Landing is the only medical isotope plant in the United States. And with Chalk River in Canada closing down, it’s going to be the only place in the entire Western Hemisphere where doctors and patients can get the nuclear isotopes they need. Do you have any idea how many patients we can help? Millions. But I can’t do it if the locals shut us down because they’re afraid.”

“You think they’re ignorant?” AJ asked, scorn coloring her tone. She was proud of her small-town, self-taught roots. “Small-town fools?”

Elizabeth braced herself, ready to wade in and do damage control. To her surprise, Grandel didn’t take offense.

“Then I’m a fool right along with them. My brother and I were raised just down river from Colleton Landing. That’s why we chose it for the plant. A chance to give something back. But after what happened in Japan, I guess everyone’s paranoid when it comes to a topic like radiation. That’s why I need you. The townsfolk need to understand that there’s no real risk—and they need to know what we’re doing so they can see how hard we’re working to keep them, to keep everyone, safe.”

“I won’t say anything unless you can prove it to me first. No scripts or spin. I get full access to your research and findings. You lie to me or make me lie to them and I’ll go public, I swear I will.”

“Wouldn’t expect anything less.” He was smart enough to hide his smile.

“And if I find anything that leads me to believe that there is something wrong with the reactor, I’m not holding back. No confidentiality clause.”

“Done.” He stood and held his hand out to AJ.

She glanced at Elizabeth, who gave her a nod, then took it.

Grandel shook. “Welcome to the family.”

THREE

We moved into the office. Elizabeth began drawing up a contract while Grandel unrolled a sheaf of blueprints across the dining table.

“You know how a conventional nuclear plant works, right?”

Wrong. I wiped my palms on the back of my jeans, hoping he didn't notice. Everything I knew about nuclear power could fit into a sewing thimble, with plenty of room left over for my thumb. But I would know everything once I got home and David had a chance to bring me up to speed. One of the perks of living with a nine-year-old genius who has an insatiable curiosity about everything.

“Why don't you walk me through it,” I suggested. “Just like you would for the people in your community.”

“Good idea. Sometimes I get too wrapped up in the technical specs. Okay, well in a conventional nuclear power plant you have the uranium fuel ready to go into fission but you keep it just under critical mass with control rods. When you're ready to generate energy, you raise the control rods so the uranium can mix together, beginning the fission process, which releases heat. That heat in turn boils the water flowing through the reactor, which produces steam, which turns a turbine, generating electricity.”

I nodded. “Not much different from how a coal plant works—except for the whole nuclear meltdown potential.”

Elizabeth shot me a stern glance, so I shut up. We were here to learn about Grandel's plant, not to debate sustainable energy.

“More than electricity, Colleton Landing generates radioactive atoms— isotopes—that doctors use to diagnose and treat disease. And even you'd agree that nuclear power is less toxic to the environment with no CO₂ emissions and no need to mine the coal.”

Professional that I am, I didn't ask him how long it would take the nuclear material left over from his plant to decay to safe radiation levels and how he intended to protect the rest of the world from it. He didn't have the answers—no one did. That was the problem. Same with coal or gas or oil. Everyone worried about what they needed here and now without thinking about the future.

Instead I pointed to the artist's rendering that graced the front page of the blueprints. “It looks different than the plants I've seen.”

Colleton Landing looked, well, I hesitated to use the word aloud, pretty. Compared to traditional plants like Three Mile Island with their massive cooling towers and large buildings housing turbines and the nuclear facility, Colleton Landing looked like a Disney theme park. The drawing showed a large central building with a dome-shaped roof flanked by two graceful wings, sitting on the banks of a wide river and surrounded by forest.

Grandel smiled and nodded, not at me but at the drawing, like a proud father. “Fifteen years of my life went into this design. I won a DOE competition—that

how I got the money to build, finally.” He caressed the outline with a finger. “Colleton Landing is different.” He flipped the page to a cutaway view of the plant’s interior, which resembled a clock face. “Instead of one large containment vessel holding the uranium, we divide it into four separate hot cells placed in a ring bathed by coolant on all sides. This allows us to harvest M-99 from the cells at different times—around the clock, so to speak.”

He chuckled at his inside joke and Elizabeth joined in. I didn’t. “A hot cell is like a small reactor, right? So you have four reactors instead of one? Does that mean you have four times the chance for an accident?”

“Of course not,” he scoffed. “That’s the beauty of my design. We have less chance of an accident than any other plant on the planet. Think of it like a submarine—in fact, our micro-reactors are partly based on the reactors the Russians used in their subs—layers upon layers of airtight doors that can protect the rest of the sub if there’s a breach. If anything, we have four times more safety built in.” He tapped the walls separating the hot cells. “Each cell has its own high-pressure containment vessel for the core, then we surround all of them in water, nestled within a secondary stainless-steel containment housing. All this sits within an outer concrete chamber strong enough to withstand a direct hit by a 747.”

“But if you have workers accessing four hot cells to harvest the isotopes, doesn’t that multiply the chance for error?”

Now he looked smug. “Not humans. Robots.”

“Robots?” Elizabeth asked.

“Robots. Because we’re partnered with the DOE, we were able to access robot prototypes the military was working on. All high-risk areas are manned by robots, remotely monitored by humans. Not only are the robots more precise and less likely to make mistakes than the humans, but they’re the only ones directly exposed to any possible contamination.”

“So where have the accidents occurred?”

His good humor and pride fled, replaced by a glimpse of fear that was quickly masked. He pointed to some lines on the blueprints. A tangle of pipes streamed between the central dome and the wings on either side. “The first was here. A leaky seal on a containment drain line released a small amount of contaminated water into the ground between the reactor building and the turbine annex before the sensors detected it.”

“The robotic sensors?” I couldn’t resist nettling him. Juvenile, I know.

“Yes. We’re equipped with state-of-the-art sodium iodine detectors. The DOE inspector’s report said they detected it far earlier than any human system would.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. I liked people, wasn’t comfortable around machines. Especially not machines smarter than I was. “And the second accident?”

“Simple human error. A crapped-up piece of metal got thrown into the recycling. But our sensors caught it before it left the facility perimeter.”

“Crapped up?”

“Contaminated.”

“So your sensors caught it inside the plant?”

He studied the map as if it held the answers. "Well, no. We caught it here." He pointed to the inner perimeter fence. "In the recycling truck."

"Didn't that contaminate everything in the truck?"

"Yeah. Very low level, though. Nothing dangerous."

I was beginning to wonder at his definition of "dangerous."

"The third accident," he stressed the last word, "was totally unrelated to the first two. A valve stuck and a small amount of water overflowed from the coolant tanks."

"Overflowed where? Into the river?"

"Oh no. Nothing like that. It backed up into a drain—left standing water on the floor, and a few workers had their shoes exposed."

He frowned again—more than a frown, a scowl. As if he were being singled out unfairly. Or rather, his plant was. "Since it's the first of its kind, Colleton Landing has come under more scrutiny than any other plant in the nation. Unlike other places that have real problems—like Indian Point, which lost 100,000 gallons of coolant before anyone noticed. Or Vermont Yankee, which has leaked not just tritium but also cesium into the groundwater. And don't get me started on the mess up in Washington State—workers repeatedly finding new caches of plutonium that the government forgot existed, hundreds of gallons of uranium, plutonium, strontium, and cesium dumped into the Mohawk River. Yet, we're the ones in the spotlight."

Wow. Guess I hit a sore spot. But Grandel's passion was the first thing I'd like about him since we met. "The investigations have cleared you each time?"

"Yes. In fact, in the first two, both the DOE and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission congratulated us on our prompt and early response and interventions." He gave his head a small shake, as if wondering at the state of the world. "Of course, the press never mentions our commendations or the part where the DOE calls us a model facility. All they talk about is how negligent we are and the risks to the community."

Finally he ran out of steam. Both Elizabeth and I were staring at him. He blushed slightly—guess underneath that corporate raider exterior he was human after all. It was nice to see.

"I'd like to learn more about those other incidents in other plants," I said. "I will give me context."

"No problem. I have reams of incident reports. I brought them with me." He nodded to his bulging brief case. "You can read them on the plane."

"Plane?"

"Sure. I have our Gulfstream waiting."

Elizabeth and I exchanged glances. "Seems like you were pretty sure we'd help you."

"Pretty desperate is more like it. I'm involved in very sensitive negotiations with foreign investors. If we don't prove that we can successfully meet the isotopic demand with Colleton Landing and that our plant design poses no public risk, I'll be ruined."

"Not to mention all those patients who won't get the care they need," Elizabeth

added.

~~“Of course. That’s always a priority. But now you understand why this is so urgent. Any more shutdowns—even if it’s only for a day or two to investigate another mishap—and we’ll be so far behind schedule that we’ll never catch up.”~~

“I understand and I sympathize,” I said. “But there’s no way I can leave for South Carolina today.”

“Why not?”

He’d never understand. But I had to be honest. “It’s my son’s birthday on Saturday. I can’t miss it.”

Grandel flushed. He wasn’t a man who people said no to, I could tell.

“Saturday? Today’s only Wednesday. How about if you come now and I’ll fly you back Friday? Just give me two days—see what you think. You can keep the retainer whatever you decide. Surely your time is worth a quarter of a million a day?”

He paused and I just stared, not sure if I should slap him for assuming I could be bought at any price or hug him for not walking away from a deal that could secure our future.

Before I could say anything, he continued, “I’ll even sweeten the pot with a bonus—a savings bond in your son’s name. He can use it for college. How’s that thousand sound?”

The air left my lungs so fast my ears popped. I hated that Grandel could buy me—or use David to do it . . . but. . . Elizabeth stood behind Grandel, mouthing “one million dollars.”

It was our future—the firm’s, David’s, my entire family’s and Elizabeth’s. How could I refuse?



Pea gravel cracked beneath the crutch’s rubber tip as David leaned his weight onto it. The noise sent a startled squirrel darting up a nearby hemlock, turning to make an accusatory skittering sound as if reprimanding David for being so loud.

“How far is he?” Gram Flora asked from a few yards below him, one hand shielding her eyes from the sun as though she wasn’t almost totally blind.

“Only to the first bend,” her personal care assistant, Jeremy, answered.

“David, that’s far enough,” she called. “Ty, go fetch him back.”

Ty said nothing. Which was why David liked him so much. The sheriff’s deputy rarely said anything unless it would make a difference, and Ty knew full well that David had his mind set on getting to the top of the mountain, all the way up to the lookout at the wishing stone.

David had been working all summer for this, the perfect birthday present. His was his birthday coming up, but he wanted to do something special for his mom. After all, she’d almost died giving birth to him—a fact he’d only learned about recently. All his life Mom had sacrificed and worked hard to take care of him. Now

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