

Zero Emissions

By

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PROLOGUE

A Central American Nature Preserve

Dick Sweeney leaned against the vintage Harley that brought him to paradise, its gas engine spewing carbon the length of the continent. He continued to wrestle with his life's challenge until a tamarin monkey chirped and dropped a piece of fruit from his hiding place in the towering canopy of trees. Flowering vines draped nearby shrubs, and the sweet scent of decay rose from verdant soil. Dick inhaled oxygen deeply from the surrounding vegetation, and blew back carbon dioxide for the plants to breathe in reply.

Suddenly he shouted, "That's it," and his insight brought momentary stillness to the forest before a pair of scarlet macaws squawked and took flight, their deep red bodies flanked by blue and gold wings that waved in unison. That's it . . . such divine simplicity. He jumped on his bike and levered the balky start pedal of his old Harley with a beat-up boot. The engine roared to life and he tore downhill to a cantina of timber beams fastened with hemp bindings. Inside, natural wall coverings, rattan furniture, and smooth stone floors cosseted the well-heeled eco-tourists he loved to hate. He swilled a celebratory pint at the bar before he pulled out his cell phone. Normally he would have begrudged the fact that cell service had penetrated even this jungle, but today he didn't mind.

"Michael, I did it! Came up with a concept that'll make oil obsolete."

"Serious?"

"Totally. Key's in the biofuel's DNA code. But to prove it'll work, I'm gonna need you to crack our hydrocarbons."

Dick couldn't stop himself. He had to spill the details. He saw the whole process so clearly. But he didn't see the bar's resident cobra listening in from his perch in the corner. That man heard something quite different – the perfect opening to get himself back in the game. He licked salt off his fingers, ran them through his scruffy hair, and knocked back another vodka.

Venezuela was still flooded with oil money, but felt the U.S. breathing down its neck with its own energy production. Emerging markets like China would buy anything for the right price, from anybody. There was no shortage of buyers.

The problem was an ex-KGB agent had nothing to sell . . . until now.

-ONE-

If this is how it feels to tell the truth, no wonder so many people lie. Or at least fudge it. Julia Darcy stared out her office window where NYU students flooded Union Square to sun themselves on a warm May afternoon, while she replayed the awful conversation in which she told her only potential client his fabrication process wouldn't stand up to a patent challenge.

She paced the empty office space with a few naked cubicles and a conference room. The one-year lease here ate up her entire savings, and no matter how well she'd done as an associate at Richards & Wright or how lofty her Harvard Law education, a paying client was essential to the success of her fledgling business. She returned to her desk and went back to the drawing board, reviewing all her contacts, her business plan, and her options. Hours passed before she left to go down the hall to the Ladies Room shared by the other small suites on the 9th floor.

On her way back she saw *him* waiting outside her door.

What is Michael Antonelli doing here? She beat his firm, Antonelli After Market Auto, in the final case she defended for Richards & Wright, and if there was an issue about that he needed to speak to Richards & Wright. Actually, his lawyer should be speaking to Richards & Wright. His presence here, while not strictly speaking unethical, was highly unusual. And the last thing she needed in an already disastrous day.

She traced the tight scar in the cleft above her upper lip before she caught herself, ripped her finger away, and pasted on a neutral professional mask. "Mr. Antonelli, what can I do for you? You must know we shouldn't speak without your lawyer present."

"I'm not here to talk about the spark plug case. Invite me in."

Not without covering my back. "Before I do, you'll need to agree to a settlement with Richards & Wright and forgo your right to appeal. You should have your lawyer present when you do so."

"No problem, Ms. Darcy, already took care of it. I wouldn't win on appeal anyway. You ran rings around my lawyer."

She motioned Antonelli in, curious if there was a chance to pick up business from him without having a conflict of interest with Richards & Wright. One door closes and another door opens, or so they teach you in business classes.

He folded his tall lean frame into one of the modern black leather chairs opposite her polished light oak desk. He didn't seem to notice her lack of staff, or chose to ignore it. She wished she could hire a legal assistant, but there'd be no one until some billings came in.

She grabbed a ballpoint pen and legal pad. "How may I help you?"

He didn't answer right away, instead he withdrew a silver fountain pen from the inner pocket of his elegant suit coat. She watched him toy with his pen, flipping it over end to end repeatedly. At last he spoke. "Ms. Darcy, I have a business proposition, the patent opportunity of a lifetime, and I think we'll make a great team."

She knew his company produced a steady stream of new products, and he'd learned the hard way that patent infringement could be expensive. If his need and her expertise matched up, perhaps they could work together. "Tell me more."

"I need your help to patent a biofuel."

Hope for a new paying client died. "I'm afraid I can't help you. It's not my area. Richards & Wright has patent attorneys with specific expertise and I can give you a few names. You need someone with an advanced degree in the field of energy."

He shrugged and his suit jacket stretched across broad shoulders. "Look, brains are better than degrees. I've seen you in action. You're good, really good. I need you for this opportunity."

Why me? Even if she possessed the knowledge he needed, did he realize he was trying to scale Mt. Olympus? His chances for success were slim to none and even if she could take the case it didn't seem fair to bill for something that would never happen.

She steeped her fingers on her desk. "Mr. Antonelli, you're not the only one chasing that dream. Lots of patents have already been filed and even if you've got a novel idea, it'll be an uphill climb."

He snapped his fingers. "Exactly why I need somebody like you, who can think outside the box."

She straightened her shoulders beneath her loose linen suit jacket and consciously tucked her hair behind her ears. In spite of the compliment coming from a successful young entrepreneur, her professional integrity told her he needed to hire expertise as well as brains for something of this sort. Still, might as well hear him out since no one else was beating down her door. "What exactly is this opportunity?"

He leaned his whole body into placing his hands flat on her desk in earnest. "A mix of genetically engineered microorganisms and refining processes to transform plant waste, like grass clippings, into gasoline."

She fiddled with her own pen to hide her disappointment at sitting across from another client with a 'me too' process. "That sounds like cellulosic ethanol. And ethanol isn't a quick fix for America's energy woes because it's alcohol. Lots of car engines would need to be redesigned, gasoline distribution systems overhauled —"

He scooted back in his chair and slapped his knee. "I knew you were right for this."

Flattering, but her MIT undergrad degree in engineering didn't exactly fit the bill. "On the contrary, if you're serious about cellulosic ethanol you need counsel with direct experience in that field because hundreds of patents already exist for producing ethanol from the non-seed portions of plants."

His blue eyes sparkled like the ocean on a sunny day. "But my process doesn't produce ethanol, it produces hydrocarbons."

That sounded too good to be true. The only reason she didn't dismiss him out of hand was because the man was no dummy. Her pretrial research for the spark plug case revealed he held a Ph.D. in chemistry.

"Yep. Short chains of carbon and hydrogen atoms . . . just like gasoline."

"Then Mr. Antonelli, if you really have a means of making gasoline from the stalks of plants, you definitely need an expert in energy patents."

"Nope, I need you. I know this won't be easy. The oil lobby owns Congress. And OPEC won't like it one bit. I need somebody with smarts and daring. Trust me. You've got what it takes."

Did she? She thought she did when she left Richards & Wright to start her own firm rather than spend five more years climbing the ladder to a partnership that was iffy, at best, in these economic times. Should she take a leap of faith and see where this led? Not much to lose.

"Your scheme intrigues me. If you forward the documents, I'll read them and be honest with you as to whether or not I think I'm the right person for your opportunity."

He shook his head. "I can't. My collaborator guards his material closely. But I can arrange for you to meet him."

Another red flag, but she persisted. "When?"

"Definitely this week or early next week. In the meantime, I'll give you background research to look at so you're up to speed."

She didn't want to get in too deep with something unlikely to pan out, especially when she was short on cash. "I'm a small firm. I'll need to charge you a *per diem* for reading what you give me."

"Done deal," he crooned. "Whatever your hourly rate at Richards & Wright, I'll double that."

His offer left her a lawyer incapable of speech.

"Personally, I'd say I'm lucky you left Richards & Wright. You're ready to handle an opportunity bigger than the composite alloy and spark plug case you won against me. And you're going to work your butt off to help me see this through. That's what I need, and what your new business needs," he said as he glanced around the empty office space with a decided gleam in his eyes.

Guess he noticed it was empty.

Michael hopped into the rear passenger compartment of his dark red 1974 Rolls Royce Silver Shadow and asked his driver, "Anybody on our tail, Tony?"

"No, Boss. Where to?"

"The office."

The car was as stable in motion as at rest, and Michael tapped his fingertips on the burlled walnut picnic tray nested behind the driver's seat as he reviewed his conversation with Julia Darcy. She was intrigued and he only unveiled half the truth to her. Once she learned what he and Dick Sweeney had dreamed into reality, a fuel cell from genetically engineered algae that, among other things, was able to transform greenhouse gases into gasoline, she'd be hooked.

She'd better be. So far Dick vetoed every lawyer he put in front of him, convinced only the best and brightest was worthy to patent a discovery he expected would win a Nobel Prize. Name lawyers didn't impress Dick. But Julia Darcy would. She had the intellect and passion to prove herself against any odds. He didn't know why, but he'd uncover that in time.

He couldn't put together the meeting between Dick and this lawyer soon enough. Once they met, it was inevitable Sweeney would get caught up in a duel of wits with her. The woman moved like a Siamese cat, a small sleek blonde beauty, polite but ready to scratch your eyes out if you weren't quick enough to keep up. When she pressed Sweeney for proof of the process's final stages, Dick would be compelled to divulge what he'd yet to disclose to Michael – the final DNA code needed to complete Michael's manufacturing process.

Once that happened he'd be able to determine if Dick's process really worked. And Julia Darcy would be able to tell him something equally important. Was it truly unique?

-TWO-

Julia Darcy, JD to friends and family, caught herself fingering her scar again and sighed. Damn it! She worked years to break that habit. What was it about Michael Antonelli's offer and 'take no prisoners' approach to getting what he wanted that still had her thinking about his opportunity 24 hours after his visit? So far she hadn't received any material from him and that meant there was a good chance no billable hours would come from this. Too bad for her empty bank account.

When she left Maine for New York it was with one purpose, to see if she could make partner at the nation's foremost patent law firm before she turned thirty. And here she sat, 29, without any contracts, waiting for a high-flying entrepreneur to send her research on what was bound to be a wild goose chase. Perhaps it was best he hadn't called, keeping her free to seek less exotic but more secure sources of income.

Still he kept popping up in her brain, his handsome tanned face bursting with intensity, short dark curly hair, long Roman nose, and audacious proposal. So, she shook his image from her brain and bent her head to begin her own search of energy patents. A single-minded focus on the black and white rules of patent law was the best way to regain her composure and at least learn something from the experience.

The desk phone buzzed and she glanced at her watch. Not quite five o'clock. She punched the speakerphone out of habit and waited for Brenda, her former assistant at R&W, to announce the caller. Then she quickly realized her error and answered, "Julia Darcy. May I help you?"

"Ms. Darcy, Michael Antonelli. I've got the research for you. I picked through the huge stack I've got and thought maybe I could bring the papers by and discuss with you why I chose what I did."

She wasn't sure she wanted to see him again so soon. "That's not necessary. You can just send them and if I have questions I'll call you."

"You sure? It's pretty complicated stuff."

Yeah, well, if you didn't think I could manage 'complicated stuff,' why offer me the job? "I'll be honest with you if it's too much for me," she said.

"Sorry, I didn't mean that you couldn't handle the material. I just thought of it as a way to get to know each other better, you know, from a client-lawyer perspective."

Ouch. Had she come across as confrontational, or worse, sarcastic? "I'm sure you're busy," she responded. "Send me the material and when your collaborator is in town we'll meet."

"Okay, I'm just anxious for you to learn about our biofuel and, well, you sounded skeptical when we met yesterday."

This guy was both quick and observant and she better watch her next step. "That's the lawyer in me. I want to do a good job for you, and frankly, ground-breaking processes aren't usually developed by one or two people acting alone."

He laughed. "No? Einstein didn't need a corporate team to develop his theory of relativity. Individuals do make a difference in this world. Individuals like my collaborator – and you."

Unnerved, she said, "It's a little early for praise. Let's see what I can or can't do for you. But thanks for the vote of confidence."

"No problem. I'll be in touch."

She didn't doubt it. He seemed hands-on and enthusiastic about his project, which could be good or annoying. She'd reserve judgment.

A few hours later the phone disrupted her study of energy patent infringement cases. Michael Antonelli again? She glanced at Caller ID. No, her mother. She suppressed a pang of disappointment and took the call.

"Ignore my messages when you get home, honey. I should've known you'd be working."

"You know how it is, Mom, I've got to earn my keep. What's up?"

"You're still coming home next weekend for Melissa's shower?"

JD tidied up sheets crammed with notes. "Still planning to. Dad's picking me up in Portland."

"Everything's all set. Melissa won't be in Maine again until after the baby's born. Our first little one, can you believe it?"

"It's exciting," she said evenly.

And it was, despite JD's worry about her sister's baby. The fetal ultrasounds were normal, but a family history, her history to be exact, increased the risk of a birth defect.

Her mind-reading mother said, "There's only a small chance the defect will be passed on. You know that JD. And surgery can fix it. Look at you."

Unfortunately she did, every day. And what she saw was the flawed, if surgically corrected, lip nature gave her. "Mom, it's okay. Don't worry about me or Melissa or your first grandchild. Look, I've got work to finish so I can come to Maine." Time for a subject change. "I've got an interesting new client and I need to get up to speed on his concerns before I meet with him later this week."

"A new client? Wonderful. Tell me about *him*."

Damn. Only a fool would let slip anything about a man, especially one who claimed to have solved America's energy woes and was probably leading her on a merry chase. Her mother's default interest in her clients usually revolved around the words male and single. "Later, Mom. I'm trying to finish up here. Bye for now."

She put down the phone and her thoughts made a beeline directly to Michael Antonelli's supposedly novel biofuel. Last night she confided in Hen Gardner, her friend and downstairs neighbor, expecting him to dismiss Antonelli's claim as crazy. Instead, he insisted America and emerging markets needed alternative energy sources, and the group with the best answers was sure to score big. Strong words from a man in his mid-thirties whose private bank already wowed Wall Street. Hen even joked about getting in on the ground floor if Antonelli needed venture capital.

Could she trust Antonelli? He was self-confident and assertive, but not disingenuous. At least she didn't think so. He never talked down to her, and she knew she could be overly touchy about that. The next test would be their technical discussions after she read all the research. She owed it to herself to see what Antonelli and his collaborator had up their sleeve. A unique biofuel would, in truth, be the patent opportunity of a lifetime. And if theirs wasn't, all she'd lose was a bona fide client to bill regularly. On the bright side she'd gain exposure to energy patent law and some ready cash from her *per diem* fee.

Sure enough, the next day a box of materials on biofuels arrived, courtesy not of a delivery service, but a large well-dressed man in his 50s named Tony who said he was

Michael Antonelli's driver. He handed her a card to prove it. To her he looked like a mafia don from a movie, but the guy's smile went ear-to-ear and he was a charmer. When she asked if he needed her signature or anything he said not to worry he'd tell Michael exactly what she looked like, a pert blonde with a million buck face, so his boss would know his delivery landed on target. She was too flustered by his compliment to reply, but after Tony left she realized how flattered she was about the million buck face. She grinned, figuring her parents probably had spent near a million dollars on her face. Of course, that didn't mean Tony's remark had any truth whatsoever.

She pulled her lunch from the minifridge in the coffee corner of her office and started to read the biofuel material while she ate cheese, crackers and an apple. But her reading was derailed when she got an unexpected email from Richards & Wright. They wanted her to take on the Compass case that was next on her docket before she left, but now as a legal consultant for them. That shocked her. According to the grapevine, once you left R&W you were as good as dead.

She called her best friend at the firm, Caitlin, to see what she could find out. An hour later and all she learned was that Caitlin hadn't heard a thing about the Compass case, but thought it was a great idea for JD to pursue. Money was money, Caitlin urged, and being a consultant for R&W could be a good source of income provided JD was careful to avoid entering agreements that might restrict her future business. This was wise and generous counsel, especially since R&W could have given Caitlin a shot at the Compass case.

Encouraged, JD spoke to the powers that be at R&W and agreed to bone up on the case for a few days and then see them. By that time she'd have enough knowledge to plan a strategy for the case and come to equitable financial terms with R&W. No surprise, she found herself accepting delivery of another box of materials later that afternoon from a pimply young man with a host of forms for her to sign before she could take possession of R&W materials. A far cry from Tony, the bearer of compliments on her high-priced face. If he only knew the real price of her crooked smile, the agony of a childhood full of surgeries.

Every time she answered the phone in the next few days she expected to hear the mellifluous voice of Michael Antonelli, but he never called. Kind of a good thing since she had put aside his materials in favor of the Compass case and her appointment with R&W at the end of the week, but she couldn't deny her disappointment. She concentrated on the Compass case even though it wasn't always easy. Not that the legal issues were difficult, just incredibly boring: yet another lawsuit involving polymer-assisted deposition of metal-oxide film. The third she'd done for Richards & Wright this past year.

The truth was Antonelli's opportunity captivated her. It also paid better, but who knew if it would pay at all. She might never hear from him again, although he didn't seem unreliable and somebody with a successful business like his really had to be dependable. More likely he was super busy and maybe his collaborator wasn't available.

Her appointment at R&W was Friday afternoon and she strode into her former employer at 4 o'clock, projecting confidence. Sure, her hand gripped her stuffed briefcase maybe a little too tightly, and her throat felt a little too parched, but she could face the partners of her old firm and hold her head high. She had her own firm now and even a client willing to pay double her *per diem*, assuming she ever heard back from

Antonelli . . .

The Compass meeting at R&W lasted until close to 7 PM. The trickiest part was, as she expected, the financial arrangements. They tried to low ball her, but she held firm and said they could take it or leave it. After all, she wasn't desperate, she had another client already . . . sort of. In the end they agreed to her terms. After that it was just work, plowing through the strategy she presented to them and nailing down next steps.

She left the meeting hopeful this kind of arrangement might work out well for her in the short run until she had a stable of regular clients, and walked down to her old office where she planned to use the proprietary R&W databases housed on their servers. The partners had offered the use of this space, which would remain vacant for the remainder of the month, and even provided an access code to their network. How accommodating. And why not? They were used to younger associates burning the midnight oil, on a Friday night no less, and she knew they'd like nothing more than to have her back in that position.

She looked around her old office. The same desk and chair. Filing cabinets full of the case documents she'd left behind that were yet to be inventoried. Amazing. She'd spent hundreds of billable hours within these walls, month after month, and yet it was as if she'd never lived here. Just an empty shell that looked like every other slave pen on the floor. Thank goodness for her decision to leave. It was the right move. Well, time would tell, but she felt in her bones it was the right move. Especially if she could get clients who paid like Michael Antonelli.

Speak of the devil. He was calling on her cell phone.

"Hi, Ms. Darcy. Can we meet in an hour? My collaborator's in town tonight."

"I'm kind of tied up right now, but maybe a little later?"

"Sure, okay, we can meet later, for a drink. Dick's a night owl, gets by on no sleep. One of a kind. You'll like him. Should we pick you up in your lobby around nine?"

"No, I'm at R&W just now tying up some loose ends, and it's going to take me a while but I'll do my best to meet you." She didn't want to seem too eager, especially since she was behind on her reading for him, and really should get the things she needed for the Compass case.

"No problem, let's say closer to ten o'clock. We'll wait for you down the street in the Oyster Bar at Grand Central. Stop by when you finish up." He hung up before she had a chance to confirm she'd definitely come.

She had more to do for the Compass case than she originally thought and kept rechecking the time. At last she finished her research. Leaving now she'd only be a few minutes late, but first she opened the billable hours app on her phone to document her R&W Compass case time and location and added in her own ten o'clock appointment at the Oyster Bar. She'd been well schooled about constant time tracking and it should stand her in good stead for her own business clients.

On the way out she waved to her friend Jose in the night cleaning crew. She felt a little guilty she didn't stop to hear him recite the latest poem he memorized in English, as she often did when she *really* worked here. But she wanted to clear her head for her meeting with Michael Antonelli by sticking to her other ritual of taking the stairs for exercise. A few seconds later she heard footsteps echo from above. It wouldn't be the first time she dropped something from her overstuffed briefcase and Jose ran after her.

A quick backward glance revealed suit pants above shiny black dress shoes, not

sneakers and dungarees. It would not only be polite, but safer, for her to step to the wall to let the rushing man pass.

She turned with a smile on her face and froze when she saw why he could not return it.

The man came on, a ski mask obscuring his face, arms outstretched, one hand clutching a crumpled handkerchief. She flung her briefcase at his chest, but it fell away as he closed in. She swiveled to run, but he snatched her jacket collar and spun her around. He urged his thigh between her legs, then pressed the handkerchief over her nose.

The rapist might not want to look at her face, but she was determined to see his and clawed at the lower edge of his ski mask.

He snatched her wrists, twisted her in a single smooth motion, and flung her down the stairs.

Please God, not my face!

She tried to shield herself with clasped arms, but the impact knocked her arms away and a loud crack vibrated through her head as darkness descended.