

THE RAINMAKER

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The Rainmaker

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ABOUT THIS PIECE

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CHAPTER ONE

THE RAINMAKER

There were two times when my knee bothered me: when it was going to rain — which for the past twenty-plus years after The Collapse was rare — and when someone was trying to swindle me on a water deal, which as a rain futures broker working at Cloud-Bank, LLC, was always. Today, there wasn't a cloud in the sky, and my knee was killing me.

I broke eye contact with the man sitting across from me, stood up from my desk, and limped to the broad picture window. From my office on the fourth floor of the Nevada Wing Administration Building atop the Hoover Dam, I could see past the dry Colorado River bed, now clogged with solar panels. Past Lake Meade, now generously called Pond Meade by the media, and Puddle Meade by us locals. A nearby mountain range rose, breaking the desert's monotony.

'Are those the Rockies?' asked Wade Burroughs, a water buyer from H2OCorp. A beefy man, over-dressed in a dark pinstripe suit and probably half my age. He fanned himself with his open hand, even in my air-conditioned office, and undid a button at the collar of his too-tight dress shirt.

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‘Oh, no.’ I chuckled as I hobbled back to my desk. ‘The Rockies are 700 miles away. That’s Mount Charleston. Just north of New Vegas.’

‘Sore leg?’ asked Wade.

I shook my head. I hated small talk. All this guy wants is my rain at his price. He’s not interested in the complications from my knee surgery at the West Coast Mecca for medical care, New Vegas Medical Center.

The orthopedics service there did over 4,000 joint replacements the year I had mine. The average patient spent seven hours there, surgery only accounting for two. Ten percent of the patients stayed overnight because they didn’t have enough fresh water at home. And ten percent of those overnights had complications requiring an extended recovery. Like me. I stayed there for nine months. On that day, I limped out the front door. The only assistive device I needed was a silver-tipped cane. It still sits behind my desk.

I left Vegas Med five years ago. My orthopedic surgeon led the parade: Dr. Willa Balcom, with nurses, aides, and all the rest who saved my leg and my life. And my fellow patients (I met hundreds during my stay), but the twenty patients on the ortho ward that day gave me a standing ovation. I keep in touch with all of them to this day. Although I’m trying, I owe that hospital a debt I can never pay. I send them a little water every month, whatever I can spare. I wish it were more.

On the downside, my right leg is now two inches shorter than my left, and I have to use the elevator, escalator, or slideway if I want to walk over ten meters. And even if I’m not walking, it still aches.

So, no. I didn't feel like sharing all that.

'It's fine.' I dropped into my chair, the stuffed cushion letting out a whoosh.

'So they call you The Rainmaker?' Wade was fiddling with his collar again, trying to release more heat. 'Is that because you were the weather girl, uh, I mean, weather woman in LA, before—'

'Yes,' I said, interrupting him so he could remove his foot from his mouth before he swallowed it. 'It was my first job, back when we had weather besides dry, drier, and driest. And when California wasn't underwater.'

'Rainmaker started because I was 'Marisol Garcia, the Weather Girl' at KTLA. Whenever it was going to rain, my tagline was, 'Remember your umbrella today because I'm gonna make it rain on you!'

'Ha ha.' He laughed nervously and mopped his brow. 'A silly little nickname, I suppose.'

Watching this guy sweat made me hot, and I get cranky when I'm hot.

'Silly? It's offensive. How could someone refer to a college-educated meteorologist as The Weather Girl? Are you The Rain-buying Boy? I bet not.'

'No,' said Wade. 'I meant—'

'But I am no longer twenty-four, Wade. I'm pushing sixty-four. This gray hair? I've earned it. Because for the past twenty-five years — yes, right after The Collapse — I haven't been forecasting the weather. I've been selling it. So no more small talk.' I narrowed my gaze at him.

Wade raised an eyebrow. 'Dina told me you like to chitchat.'

‘Dina was hosing you, and not in a good way.’ I remembered Dina, that snooty buyer from the northwest region. She was pissed her last contracts didn’t tap out as planned. So, now she was either trying to screw poor Wade as he negotiated for a contract, irritate me, or both.

‘So let’s get down to it. I have rain contracts. You want them. How many MSIs do you want?’

He didn’t flinch. ‘One hundred seventy-seven.’

I did a double-take. ‘You’re serious.’

He nodded.

I swiped up my calc screen. ‘Convert 177 MSI to MiGs.’

Numbers flashed as the program converted Miles-Squared Inches of rain to Millions of Gallons. ‘You want 3000 MiGs of water? Are you crazy, rich, or deluded? And I hope it’s all three, because that’s a lot of rain. Are you trying to supply the whole East Coast?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘Just Greater Pittsburgh and the Appalachian Valley.’ He stood and took off his coat. Huge sweat stains drenched his underarms.

What a waste of good water. And then his words sunk in.

‘The Appalachian Valley?’ I sputtered. ‘You might as well be supplying the entire East Coast when you’re buying for the third-largest city. Why not throw in Columbus, Charlotte, and Atlanta and call it a day?’

‘First things first,’ said Wade. ‘We can discuss those later.’

‘Wait.’ I returned to my calc screen. ‘My catch basins range in size from ten to one hundred MSI. I’d have to call in a lot of favors

to get that much water. Don't you have any collectors in your region? Western Penn is a big state. And you're coastal in Greater Pittsburgh. What about desalination?"

'We are desalinating,' he replied. 'And our basins are earmarked for smaller towns to the north and south. But even after processing ocean water, it has too many impurities for our plans.'

'Duh.' I rolled my eyes. 'No one drinks desalinated water — not if you want to keep your teeth and internal organs. It's used in industry. Rainwater is for drinking — much easier to alkalinize to a potable level.'

He hesitated a beat. 'Of course.'

I arched an eyebrow. 'How else are you planning to use it?'

'Not important. Here's my offer.' He tapped at his cell. A number hovered in the air. He leaned back in his chair, still sweating.

It was a tremendous figure, but it wasn't enough to cover 3 BiGs. I shook my head.

'Name your price,' said Wade. 'My pockets are deep but not bottomless.'

I swiped back into my calc screen and brought the visual to my desktop. How many basins will I need?

'And then when we're done,' he added, 'we can negotiate futures for those other cities, too.'

I looked away from my calculations. 'So, what gives, Wade? Why are you suddenly the biggest water magnate on the Eastern seaboard?'

'I'm not at liberty to say.' Wade crossed his arms. 'You'd need to sign an extensive NDA, and I don't have time to execute one before my train leaves for the Tennessee Valley.'

‘Then I’m not at liberty to sell,’ I said. ‘If I’m diverting all these rain contracts to you, I’ll be hanging other long-time customers out to dry. I can’t do that if I don’t know where your water is going.’

Wade shrugged. ‘Impasse.’

‘Then you should leave now for the TVA. When you get there, say hi to their broker, Sandy, for me. He loves to shoot the bull. But that’s because he doesn’t have access to enough rain futures to fill a backyard swimming pool if you remember when those were a thing.’

‘I don’t.’

‘Of course not. Almost fifty years ago, people lived extravagantly. They’d dig a hole, fill it with a tenth of a MiG of water, and just lounge in it. For fun. It wasn’t even drinkable.’

‘If you say so.’ Wade shrugged.

‘Yeah. The world was an oasis back then: before geo-engineers pumped aerosolized sulfur compounds into the atmosphere in a fool’s attempt to buff our ozone layer. That worked out well, as we know.’

‘I’ve never seen a swimming pool,’ said Wade, a little annoyed. ‘But I’ve been alive for the past thirty-four years. I know what caused The Collapse. And bad-mouthing a competitor is unbecoming, Ms. Garcia. Mr. Sanderson MacRae told me he could fulfill my water needs. You’re not the only cloud in the sky.’

‘I know. But we are the biggest. And Sandy, his eyes are bigger than the ocean. That’s not bad-mouthing — it’s truth-telling.’ I yawned. ‘Before you transfer creds from your not-quite-bottomless wallet to Sandy, make sure he can name enough basins to get 3 BiGs of water — let alone sell you the rights. I swiped the

calc screen away and stood up. My knee buckled before I could bear full weight, and I sat down. Hard.

Wade reached forward as if he might try to slow my fall. 'You okay?'

'I'm fine.' I'd tried to make it look like I decided not to get up, but I didn't fool him. I twirled around in my chair, grabbed my cane, and used it to stand. Now, more slowly and with success. 'I'll show you out, since we're done.'

'Wait.' He held up a hand. 'I can't tell you everything. Hell, I don't understand how it works. But if you sign a mini-NDA by voiceprint, I'll give you some details?'

I eased myself back into the chair, using the cane for support. 'I'm listening.'

He tapped his cell. A document floated in the air above my desk. I read it, and said, 'Marisol Theodora Garcia. I agree to tell nobody about your mysterious device.'

Wade nodded and swiped the executed mini-DNA back into his cell. 'You're familiar with 3D printers?'

I rolled my eyes. 'I couldn't build one, but of course I am.'

He leaned in toward my desk and lowered his voice. 'Well, we've developed a molecular version. We can print water.'

If the guy did not look so earnest, I'd have laughed in his face. 'You're kidding.'

'No. You just have to feed in water and other materials. It analyzes it, and then water comes out.'

Now, I did laugh. 'Wade, that's not a 3D printer. That's a conduit. I have one of those. Pour water in one end, and it flows out the other.'

‘No!’ He raised his voice, color rising in his face. ‘If I put in one MiG of water with an equal volume of organic matter, our printer could create five MiGs of water. Pure, drinkable water. The printer disassembles the organic material, separating hydrogen and oxygen to recombine them into the finished product. I’ve seen it. It works.’

‘Impossible,’ I said. ‘And if it can disassemble matter, why do you need the water?’

‘A template, I think. I don’t know. I didn’t build the thing,’ said Wade. ‘My bosses sent me here to get enough water to make it work. So, will you sell to me or not?’

‘It seems outrageous,’ I said. ‘But if it did, the ramifications...’

‘Exactly.’ Wade sat back in his chair, looking smug.

‘You need so much water.’ Some of that water I’d promised to Vegas Med, and I couldn’t short them.

Wade stood up. ‘Can you help me? Or should I call every other water broker in the country?’

‘Don’t wet yourself.’ I swiped up, and my rain map popped back into view. ‘I’m looking at Sector 7, 8 and 9. There’s talk of a storm front moving in next week. I suppose I could sell you the rights for two weeks. It should drop about 600 MiGs in each.’

‘That’s not enough.’

‘I know that, Wade.’ I tapped several other sectors. ‘If I add the rain rights in Sectors 1, 4, and 6, projected at 400 MiGs each, that should do it.’ I looked through the floating data to stare at Wade. ‘Now let’s talk money. Make me an offer.’

‘Recent forecasts suggest that rain will fall in those sectors, so supply should be high, relatively speaking. I’ll offer eleven per MSI.’

'Fifteen,' I countered.

'Twelve,' he replied.

'Twelve won't cut it with the demand we're seeing. Sure, the market's betting on rain, and the forecast is on their side. But the market has been wrong. And then I am left holding the bag. One that's not full of rainwater. But I have a deal that might work.'

'I'm listening.'

'How about I write you a contract for fourteen per MSI, but with a catch: if it rains over five inches over the time allotted in those basins, we split the overage. The weather wonks are only predicting four. If it rains less than three inches, you get two back per MSI, and I look for other contracts to fill your need, all at twelve.'

'So you want us to split the extra if it pours, but you'll refund me if it drizzles — and fill my contract at the lower price? What's the catch, Marisol?'

'The catch, Wade, is that I think the storm will be heavier than people expect. A lot of traders are underestimating. So, I'm willing to bet on a heavy rain. Plus, with that hedge, you reduce your risk. It's win-win.'

'What if there's a downpour?' asked Wade. 'Could I end up paying for more than three BiGs?'

'Too much water is a problem I have never heard of, but if you end up with more MiGs than you need, I'll find buyers for the extra, and we can negotiate the selling price and split the profit. My standard commission is 10% on those contracts, too.'

'Make it 9%, and I'm authorized to sign off right now.'

'No deal,' I said. 'I don't discount my services. Ten or walk.'

He hesitated and tried to stare me down. I didn't blink. He did.

‘I’ll take the deal. Fourteen million for the rain futures per MSI, with the over-under stipulation on the rain levels we discussed, and your 10% commission.’ Wade stuck out his hand to seal the deal.

‘One more thing.’

Wade dropped his hand and his shit-eating grin. ‘What?’

‘This water printer you’ve developed. I want a 10% interest in it.’

‘Ha! Your brain must be waterlogged if you think my bosses will give up that much equity in an invention that could single-handedly solve the American water crisis. And maybe end the worldwide drought.’

‘Well, you can’t make water without my rain,’ I said. ‘Back to that impasse.’ ‘Ten percent is ludicrous,’ said Wade. ‘They might part with 1% for a 10% discount on this and all futures contracts.’

‘Tell them 4% stake and 8% discount, and we have a deal,’ I said.

‘They’ll never—’

‘And tell them their new 4% partner won’t be me, personally. Two will go to CloudBank, LLC, providing an 8% discount on rain futures in perpetuity. The other half will go to the Rainbow Hospital Corp. They own the med center in New Vegas and a dozen others nationwide. Consider it a charitable donation. A write-off and a gesture of goodwill.’

Wade raised an eyebrow. ‘They might buy that angle.’ He took out his cell and tapped some notes. ‘I’ll get back to you later today.’

‘And execute a full NDA for me and my team. I’ll need experts to ensure your magical water fountain works before my boss signs off.’

‘I’ll make it happen, Rainmaker,’ said Wade. He stood up and stuck out his hand.

I rose from my desk without using my cane, gripped his hand, and we shook to seal the deal. Then he left my office. I thought he was whistling.

Three BiGs per month? And multiple contracts after that? This could be exactly the break I needed. I pulled out my cell and tapped the contact for my admin. I didn’t have to check with any boss. I was the boss at CloudBank ever since I started the company on a hunch that global warming and melting polar ice caps would be a death sentence for regular rainfall. Any meteorologist worth her barometer would know that, but few invested in empty acreage and built catch basins. I owned some, leased more, and had close ties to the rest.

But being the CEO of CloudBank was a secret I guarded almost as closely as my artificial knee. If buyers knew I had the final say, how could I stall without raising suspicion? I sent a note to my admin asking him to confirm the rain totals that my Knee Network had promised. I wasn’t the only one whose knee throbbed when a heavy rain was coming. And since I met hundreds of joint replacement patients during my time at Vegas Med, and they lived all over the country, I had good intel on rainfall just about anywhere.

I tapped another contact on my cell, and a Black woman with close-cropped salt-and-pepper hair and wearing a white lab coat over a blue blouse appeared.

‘Mari,’ said Dr. Willa Balcom. ‘What a surprise. Our regular call isn’t for another week. Is your knee okay?’

‘Thanks to you and your team, it is,’ I said. ‘But this call is not a doctor-patient virtual visit.’

‘Oh?’

‘No, more of a CEO-to-CEO ground floor offer, Willa.’

‘Don’t keep me floating,’ said Willa.

‘How’d you like to make Rainbow Hospital Corp a flood of money, enough to fund all your indigent care patients for a lifetime?’

‘Thank you! That sounds amazing,’ said Willa. ‘That’ll buy a lot of water, too.’

‘Water will be the least of your worries. If things work out, I’m gonna make it rain on you and your patients for a long, long time.’

SOURCE

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